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ISSUE 195 JULY 2008

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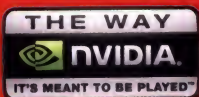


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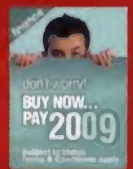
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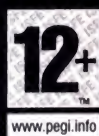
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COVER STORY

56 FAR CRY 2

Steve Hogarty gets brutal with the wildlife on the African plains



BACK TO BASICS?

NOW I'M EDITOR of a magazine I have to deal with things that aren't exclusively to do with shooting Nazis in the face – budgets, printer deadlines... boring stuff you wouldn't really care about. I also have to sit in meetings with people – perfectly nice people I might add – who aren't quite as buried in the world of PC gaming as I am. And it often shows.

I work in a room full of people who will entirely understand it when I compare our office basement to Black Mesa, do an impression of a *Quake Wars* medic or say "Gratz" instead of "Very well done". As such, it's often with a feeling of dawning horror that I sit in a meeting and realise that instead of discussing Important Business, I'm actually halfway through a complicated analogy to the benefits my leatherwork skills bring to my fledgling *WOW* guild. What I was saying was actually astute, but oddly enough, no one seemed to understand what I was banging on about. I even got a couple of raised eyebrows fired in my direction.

It's not just that though. To you and me the various gaming jargon contained within our magazine is entirely clear, to others it's clear as mud: "mobs", "NPC", "turtling", hell, even the acronym "FPS" will be lost on some. If we want to open up our chosen medium and strengthen PC gaming, do we have to dumb down? Or are games like *The Sims* feeding more and more new PC gamers into the shallow end of the gene pool? I'd be interested to hear your thoughts...

Will Porter

Will Porter, editor

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NEVERQUEST 123

"Running around like a Pac-Man cutscene"



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WHAT'S ON THE COVER?



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66 MASS EFFECT

Too busy? *PC ZONE* in 68 words... Since the dawn of time, there has raged a war. A war between people who thought this part of the page was designed to be a serious distillation of the magazine into a two-digit number of words, and those who thought it was a bit of fun, begging to be messed around with. If you are reading these words, it means the second group of people have won.

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BRITAIN'S BEST PC GAMES MAG

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Bioware's new space adventure makes a devastating impact

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BLOGS!

Freeware

Steve Hogarty stands in judgment of yet more free games

KAROSHI 2.0

Prepare to die a thousand deaths

GAME OF THE MONTH

DON'T TOUCH THE SPIKES

GYMNAST

You win when you're spinning

ROM CHECK FAIL

You've got fail

WEBGAME OF THE MONTH

ROM CHECK FAIL

You've got fail

112 FREEPLAY In the value for money equation, Steve Hogarty plays the games that return a divide by zero error

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See page 118 for full T&Cs.

MEET THE TEAM



Once in every lifetime, comes a love like this. I need you,
you need me, oh my darling, meet the team...



STEVE HOGARTY

Odd Irish One

AGE: 21

LIKES: Gazelles

DISLIKES: Tigers

FANCIES: Going to Nando's

FAVOURITE GAME: *Elite II*

NOW PLAYING: *EVE Online*

Hogarty has just come back from seeing *Far Cry 2* in Montreal. In his excitement at this opportunity, Steve said that it felt like "his first press trip ever", forgetting that on his first press trip he lost his passport, missed his flight, went on a *Planes, Trains & Automobiles* adventure, didn't sleep for 36 hours and got so rat-arsed that he interviewed people through a mist of bile and yak. They grow old so quick, don't they?



LOG 'JON' BLYTH

Reviews Human

As part of a rebranding operation, Jon 'Log' Blyth will now be known as Log 'Jon' Blyth, and his logo will be a crossed pair of sparklers in front of a rainbow.

NOW PLAYING: *Trials 2*



JAMIE SEFTON

Editor-at-Large

This month Sefton was coaxed back into the office by a trail of Haribo, and found everyone but Log was in a different country. Odd that.

NOW PLAYING: *Half-Life 2: Deathmatch*



WILL PORTER

Editor At His Desk

Recently Will has been 'doing very, very important work' pool side in Majorca, dined with developers at Nobu and had a monkey on his head. That's right - a monkey!

NOW PLAYING: *Trials 2*



ED ZITRON

Party Liason

When not saying outrageous things that aren't true and sternly wagging his fingers for emphasis, Ed puts on parties for American frat house students. Trufax.

NOW PLAYING: *Mass Effect*



MARTIN KORDA

Indie Bear

When he's not reviewing games, Korda walks into pubs, rests his forehead on the end of a table and catapults it out of the window using only his eyebrow muscles.

NOW PLAYING: *Bear Tussle XI*



STEVE HILL

Freelance Quester

When Steve went to Leamington Spa, we knew one would break the other. We've heard from Steve since, but not from the spa town.

NOW PLAYING: *Race Driver: GRID*

WHAT'S HELPED THIS MONTH... *TrackMania* is now in 3D! Proper 3D that needs glasses and everything!

WHAT HASN'T HELPED THIS MONTH... Not realising that Ed's plane got in at noon, when he was supposed to be at EA by nine.

What we've been talking about...

LEFT 4 DEAD 10min Three-fifths of PCZ have now played it, and it's getting better each time. Best PC co-op ever.

£100? 2min To sit in a room and be recorded? Our Dictaphone'll do, thanks.

GARLIC SHOOTERS 30min And the heavy sheen that rests on your tongue all night.

BALLOON PRIEST 10min One of the harder clown tricks.

ROCK BAND 5min Tap. TAP. Tap. Rat-ta-ta-Tap. Could *Official 360 Mag's* wanna-be drummer sound more annoying?

"HARD WORK" IN THE MEDITERRANEAN 27min Yeah Will. Because that's exactly what happened.

MONKEY IN THE OFFICE 2hr A lunch break made amazing by the fact that it shat on someone's desk.

PRINCE OF PERSIA 42min We'd got a bit bored of the boy POP. Now we're waving the flag again.

GERMAN ROLEPLAY CONS 15min Log's mead consumption has been on the low side. Something had to be done.

HOW MUCH BOWARE LIKE FISH 1.5hr Honestly, get them started and they won't shut up.

WIN!



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LETTERS



Just as day is dawning, *Will Porter* picks up all the post bags in his van



KING OF LETTERS

IDEAS MAN

I've had an idea for a game in my head for over two years now, and luckily nobody else has had the same idea yet. Finally I've decided to start getting my vision down on paper, so I've bought myself a little notebook and snazzy pen. This notebook goes everywhere with me and it's already brimming with lovely gaming nuggety goodness. Most notes have been written in the middle of the night when I've had a flash of inspiration and committed it to paper in case I'd forgotten by the morning!

Your recent article on writing in games has galvanised me further and I've penned a fascinating intro for the game that's got me positively bouncing with excitement. But now I'm stuck. I think that I need to produce a lovely bound document to present to software houses (am I right?), but I'm really hoping for you to give me some guidance on the sort of things this document should contain. I've got some mates who could probably



You ain't seen these, right?

put some concept art together for me, and I could include sections on gameplay features, plot, characters and settings, etc. I'm sure there are thousands of people out there with cool ideas in their heads, but they don't know how to present them or get a big game publisher to take the ideas seriously.

James Williams

The sad truth is that very, very few games developers... well, none... accept unsolicited game pitches. Most only have a couple of projects truly on the boil, so ideas often come internally rather than from hopefuls such as yourself.

The best direction for you to go in is to immerse yourself in either the indie or mod scene, making stuff that shows off your fresh ideas to create a buzz online and a tangible gaming CV, before waving it at the games industry in the hope that

WIN!



Want to be King of Letters? Then you'd better put pen to paper, or if you're at all PC-literate (which we're guessing you are) fingers to keyboard. The winner will get £100 worth of free games, and decent ones from a genre you like as well. Not just any old shit. (The one's you get won't be the ones we've pictured by the way, unless you're mad keen on them.)

the mothership beams you up. Most of the talent in places like Valve, Epic and Crytek got through the door this way - and if you're talented there's no reason why you can't either.

This won't happen in a day and you'll have to start at the bottom of the heap, but if your ideas are as amazing as you claim - who knows, maybe you could be the next Spector. Good luck...

EVERYBODY HURTS

Just finished issue 193 with the usual great satisfaction, giving of thanks and sacrificing of domesticated animals. However I was deeply disappointed to find, not one but indeed two glaring errors in the feature about *Aliens: Colonial Marines*.

My initial response was WTF! Not only was it John Hurt rather than William Hurt who should have got a mention but, perhaps more shockingly, your poor deluded writer seems to be under the false impression that the dull, cretinously acted excuse for low-grade celluloid toilet paper that is currently sullyng the great name *Battlestar Galactica* is actually better than the

original masterpiece with Dirk 'Faceman' Lt. Starbuck' Benedict in it.

I can only assume that someone's been slipping acid into the *PC ZONE* water cooler.

Turan Holland

I admit it - as sci-fi fans we totally dropped the ball on the Hurt issue. I blame Sefton myself, but I'm editor - so I have to suck up the nerd-hate.

Of the many emails we received about this though, I've printed yours because it does allow me to save face a little by lambasting your entirely wrong opinions on the new *Battlestar Galactica*.





"I think it's sad that gamers and the industry are misunderstood"

Clare Stogden proves gamers can be normal – and female, too

There's more to girl gaming than *The Sims*. Someone should tell EA...

For shame, man. The old *BSG* had its merits, but at the end of the day still starred a robotic dog/teddy bear thing and a whiny little brat. The new one has clever political analogies and sexy women often shown in the almost-altogether. Case closed, I feel.

A REAL GIRL

Firstly, I love the mag and I've been reading it for about 15 years. The lads-mag tone doesn't offend me and your reviews are excellent. I'm saying this as I seem to be a rare breed of gamer. I'm female. Yes, female. A woman.

But before you stop reading let me say that while I do own, and will confess to having played, both *The Sims* and *Sims 2*, I am a proper gamer.

I'm a 28-year-old normal woman, I'm married, I like shoes, hair and make-up. I also love games. I'm writing only because in issue 193 you published a letter by Richard Lane commenting on articles written by two female *Times* journalists. I think it's sad that the gaming industry and gamers are misunderstood. These journalists seem to imply that there's something wrong with playing games and that it's a male/teen thing or a kid's pastime. I would just like to say to them, "Find a hobby!"

I've been playing games since I was five years old and I started off on the old

BBC Micro and its 5.25in floppies and I've now got a PC, Xbox 360 and a PS3. I also have a degree and a job. I am normal. You wouldn't look at me and say, "Oooh, she must be one of those weird gamers."

Clare Stogden

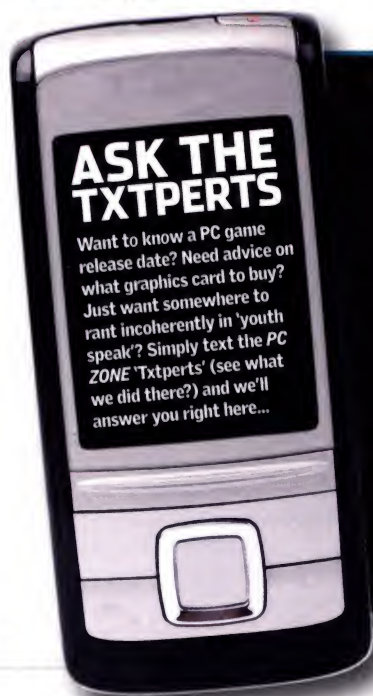
We're not a lads mag are we? We stopped putting Page 3 girls in nun costumes and presenting them with phallic joysticks a good decade ago. Still, this is a point worth banging on about: girls

liking games is not unheard of and certainly not unnatural. I once even met one who thought ninjas were cool. Whoever thought of that? A girl liking ninjas.

Now all we have to do is find some women who like strippers and fighting, and we can ram this equality down *The Times'* stupid fuddy-duddy throats.

SHORT CIRCUIT

Pavel Barter's Special Report on the shrinking length of games raised some



ASK THE TXTPERTS

Want to know a PC game release date? Need advice on what graphics card to buy? Just want somewhere to rant incoherently in 'youth speak'? Simply text the PC ZONE 'Txtpters' (see what we did there?) and we'll answer you right here...

Any idea when *Fable 2* is to be released?
Scott Grant

Well, it's Christmas for 360 in all probability – so we'll be looking at middle of 2009 for the PC release. Which will be the version with an ending.

No armoured bears for a few issues now.
Bad show.

NathanSpedding

I don't know, one armoured bear turns up and everybody expects a load more. Have patience!

Are they making *Hidden & Dangerous 3*?
Anon

This is guesswork, but I'd say that it's 92 per cent certain that *Illusion* (sorry, 2K Czech) will be working on an *H&D* game alongside *Mafia II*.



SEND US YOUR REVIEWS WIN A FREE GAME!

WORLD IN CONFLICT

Sent in by Jack Roscoe

PC ZONE score: 92%

World in Conflict was much touted as one of the best RTS games ever made and while it featured astonishing graphics, this was only in DirectX 10 mode. In DX9 on max settings it looked distinctly average, even for an RTS. Not only that, but the single player campaign was fairly bland, with allies shoe-horning you into a linear path, a set of frustrating secondary objectives measuring your ability to withstand brain damage and units that are almost identical on all sides. The multiplayer was the best feature, but even this was too hectic – it's supposed to be an RTS, not *UT3*!

Your shout: 79%



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Fable 2: now with dog!

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interesting points. It's probably because I'm 53 and rather slow-witted, but it took me about 30 hours (rough estimate – I didn't time it) to get through *BioShock*. Granted, at least four hours of that was spent looking for the code to the elevator (which I never found and had to get from the net), but it startles me that even a player born after 1988, and thus having highly evolved computer gaming genes, could get through the game in 'around 15+ hours', as stated in the article.

I admit, though, that I like to take my time and look around the fascinating virtual worlds of the better games and carefully figure out a plan of attack (or, more often, escape), which usually fails anyway. *Portal* in three hours? That's how long it took me the second time through. Given my style of play, I'm happy with a game that's shorter rather than longer.

Younger players might not feel cheated by shorter games if they'd learn to slow down and smell the Adam.

Chris Pankow

For every gamer who wants to waltz daintily through a game, there's another power player who's only interested in ploughing through the thing until they 'beat' it. A word that I get infuriated with whenever I hear it used.

Then again, as long-time freelancer Richie Shoemaker wryly pointed out after that issue, sharing the cover with the incendiary line 'Are games getting shorter?' were *Team Fortress 2* and *World of Warcraft*: two titles that are pretty much endless. I'm a slow-paced gamer



Max Payne: still with nothing to lose.

too though, so don't worry – we'll get there in the end.

HOLLYWOOD HISTORY?

I enjoyed the article on games writing but I have to call foul on your statement: "the games and interactive experiences our children will one day play will leave Hollywood's dusty celluloid-based medium far, far behind." No, it won't. Please don't be silly!

Hollywood was built on the Western and the thriller, yet there has never even been a suggestion of a decent Western-based game. Even if that were to happen, I doubt it would be a better experience than *The Searchers* or *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Fantastic games like *Max Payne 2* get close to the spirit of a noir thriller, but it's still an impossible target. I don't doubt the power of an interactive experience, but it fundamentally can't challenge the passive experience of a classic film or book. Can you really imagine playing *No Country for Old Men*?

Where games do have the edge is sci-fi (I think the atmosphere of *Half-Life* and its sequel is beyond the movies of at

least the last 10 years), but comics have had that edge for even longer.

The games industry should be looking to gain a respectable place alongside and within other entertainment, not to usurp it. I hope we get to the point where the box-office of lazy rubbish like *Spider-Man 3* can be seriously threatened by a game, because that will force filmmakers to meet the challenge, much as TV once did. Hollywood under serious threat might produce a new golden age for both mediums.

Jon Meakin

Thanks Jon. The point I was attempting to make was that as a social experience, one day I believe that going to the movies will be eclipsed by forms of interactive entertainment. Like the Holodeck in *Star Trek*, only without the daft Moriarty business. In any case, you put together a strong argument.

DENTON RETURNS

Having just flicked through to the Buyer's Guide, I've noticed that *Deus Ex* has been there for 100/101 issues and is the oldest game there. According to my shoddy maths calculations that's roughly 769 years! I think this proves the point that graphics aren't everything and helps reinforce some of what was said in the games writing feature. I think some form of celebration should be in order, so I'm off to install it for the 20th time.

Fraser Wilson

Go for it Fraser! Have you tried it with the *Shifter* mod (yukichigai.googlepages.com/shifter)? In its own words *Shifter* 'removes the suck' from *Deus Ex* – well worth a download. ☺

What's on the PCZ hard drive?

KAROSHI 2.0

The lead game in this month's Freeware (page 112) deserves another mention; utterly brilliant with superbly illogical/logical puzzles. Killing yourself has never been so much fun.

FALLEN EMPIRES: LEGION

We're on the beta, and you know it's really rather good. Or is it the old *Tribes* rose-tinted specs making us tingly? More next issue.

SCRABULOUS

Stop the giggling at the back please. Log just got Dogmunt for 13 points. (Not sure how though).

WHAT'S ON YOUR HARD DRIVE?

THIS MONTH: ALBERT HAMMOND

THE ORANGE BOX

Because there's so much in it, and one day, just one day, when my son discovers a world beyond Xbox Live, I may finally get my long promised taste of online gaming.

SOLDIERS: HEROES OF WW2

Because I couldn't get *Company of Heroes* to work and it's got character despite its faults.

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

Because it came so highly recommended I just had to try it!

Want to tell us what's on your hard drive? Visit the forums at www.pczone.co.uk and let rip.

PCZONE AROUND THE WORLD



We want photos of you with PC ZONE in the most exotic or inappropriate locations. Candid celeb shots count double. Every one printed wins a prize!

Hands up who's on fire!



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PLAYSTATION 3



XBOX 360 LIVE

NINTENDO DS

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COVER STORY

FAR CRY

Beautiful. Savage. A revolution in gaming. Is this a new dawn for the

2

free-form shooter?



WHEN YOU FIRST heard the fateful words *Far Cry 2*, what did you think? We'll be honest – we expected a console-y *Crysis* knock-off with Jack Carver in a slightly more graphically impressive Hawaiian shirt and a few extra pixels.

What we didn't expect was a technological free-roaming marvel set in Africa with some of the most intriguing dynamics ever wedged into the 'man with guns' genre. But can the fiery action live up to Ubisoft's lavish promises of vast savannahs and frolicking Thompson gazelles? We looked up at the developer with a wistful expression and they threw us into Africa.

Page

56

**PCZONE**

UPFRONT

Everything that matters in the world of PC gaming

Open up

H EY, GET THIS: choice is an illusion of our highly evolved conscious minds and fundamental causality has controlled every action in the universe since its beginning. Free will is a façade, and fate is a dog that follows you home and looks in your window at night. Excuse me if I rocked your boat, but it appears to be made of blind assumption and so is rather prone to wobbling.

Look, next time you're in London on the Tube, try to open all the doors. You'll find that 92 per cent of them are locked, exactly the same percentage as *Quake IV*. Next time you're swimming, swim right out towards the horizon. You'll be eaten by a conveniently placed shark or shot at by a previously unseen gunship. Next time you're on a bus, announce to fate that you are not getting off at the next stop, but then suddenly get off at the next stop. You'll see that all the buildings are low-res and haven't loaded in properly yet. There it all is – the proof that life, in reality, is disappointingly linear.

At the opposite end of the scale you've got open-world games – where player freedom reigns supreme and choices are heaped upon options and decisions to make a delicious sundae of free-roaming greatness. So march into our Free-form Shooter Special to see how this re-emergence of open-endedness is offering us newfound levels of liberty and depth, and by all means start on whatever page you like.

*Steve Hogarty***Steve Hogarty** Section editor

GO, SLIMER GO!

Executive producer Brendan Goss on *Ghostbusters***WEBSITE** www.ghostbustersgame.com/uk **ETA** Autumn

Q Is it fun, working with Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis?
Or does it get constricting?

A Dan is exactly like Ray in the movies – that's just the way he is. Bouncing off the wall, crazy energy, so enthusiastic. You get him talking and he's like, "We could do this! And we could do this! This is going to be awesome!" He's very motivating.

Harold is a lot more of a director, he wants to know the nuts and bolts; how we're going to do this, which camera angles. He literally takes Dan's energy, like "You're nuts! Let's get this focussed down!" The two of them make a very powerful writing team.

Are any of the main cast gamers?

Dan definitely plays the most out of all the talent, although all of them have all the consoles. Dan is in contact almost day to day, really involved! Some of the lines we're getting through, like "I was

getting coffee for everybody, but the monsters spilled it..." it's really funny.

Is the game set soon after *Ghostbusters II*?

Yeah. Times Square is built up to be in 1991, we're doing the Thanksgiving day parade there and we've got the actual announcers from 1991! Sierra and Sony literally pooled everything for this. Oh, and do I have a treat for you, we got the masters for the musical score and found out there was 75 minutes recorded that was never used in the films – so this is the first time you're going to hear it.

So is every single ghost from the films in there?

We've got Stay Puft, Slimer and Vigo the Carpathian... everybody's back. But with Dan and Harold, they're very sensitive to that stuff – you can't bring back Stay Puft unless you have a reason. I'm trying to think who's left out...

The skeleton taxi driver?

We pay homage to everybody...

What about the floating sexy woman who unzips Ray's flies?

You may see that! You know Dan even remembers that actress' name, he remembers that scene quite fondly!

Janine?

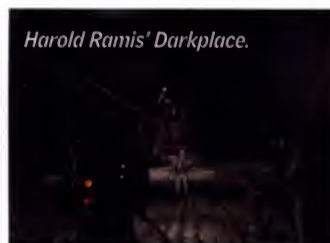
Yeah, Annie Potts actually recorded her dialogue two weeks ago. We literally went after everyone, although it was decided that Sigourney Weaver wouldn't be returning and Rick Moranis is retired, sitting on an island somewhere sipping on a Mai Tai and enjoying the success of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*.

How about the bloke from the council, Walter Peck?

Mr Peck is back! He's all over this! How do you reckon it must feel to have people coming up to you on the street for 20



Slime and gunk are orders of the day.



Harold Ramis' Darkplace.



What did you think of Ray?

STOP PRESS!

GRUMPY CRYTEK

Rampant *Crysis* piracy and a lack of profits has led Crytek to declare it unlikely that they'll make any PC exclusives in future. Boo! Hiss! Etc.

IMMINENT SPORE

The *Spore Creature Editor* will hit the internet in June. So everyone can make their own bum-antler thingies that will dominate the universe. Or get eaten.

STALIN VS MARTIANS

The murderous dictator will meet his match in *Stalin vs Martians*. The developers say the Martians will "look like a gay parade of cartoonish creatures". Can't wait.

24

Space Siege

We avoid mechanical hand self-pleasure gags for another issue.



46

Fallout 3

Bethesda hit the wastes with Dogmeat in tow. The future never looked so gloriously grim.



56

Far Cry 2

The first play of the 21st century's answer to *Heart of Darkness*.



This is what PCs were made for – 3D Dan Aykroyds.



years saying "This man has no dick!". He's back with some great lines. We were going through them the other day.

So is Slimer a good guy or a bad guy? *Ghostbusters II* and *The Real Ghostbusters* muddled the water.

In the film he's a bad guy, in the cartoon he's a pet. We're touching on that duality. Very early in the game we use him as a training mechanic, he breaks out and goes where any Slimer would go – to the buffet.

Are there any other battles on the scale of the one with the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man?

Yes. And bigger. Let's just say that the Golem technology that we showed you is very powerful.

The Golem technology – does that involve the bit in the library where all the books in the water fly in the air to form a monster?

Yeah. Now imagine what you can do on a city-scale with that.

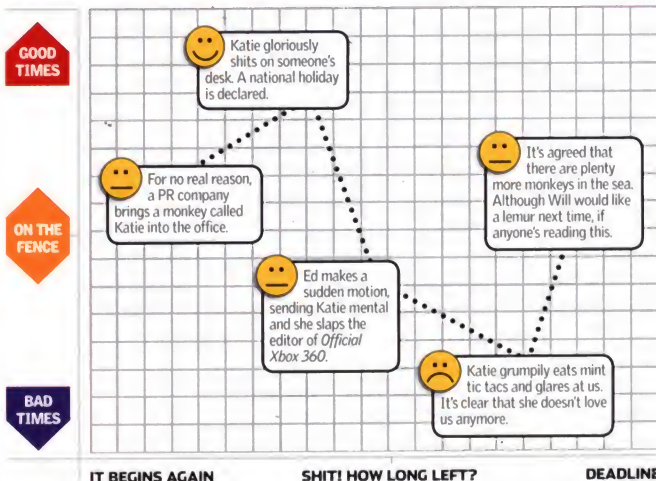
Rick Moranis won't appear, as he's quite happy being retired.



STUFF

EA have announced *Battleforge*, an online co-op RTS game built around the concept of enacting battles imagined in card games like *Magic: The Gathering*. You'll win cards of various magical hues (Fire, Frost, Nature and Shadow) by defeating powerful enemies, which can then be laid down in future bouts as buffs, magic powers and creature summonings. Packed with social and community stuff to tie the fans together, it's the most forward-looking RTS we've seen in aeons. More info as we get it.

Life is a rollercoaster



DEAD OR ALIVE

Online, but out of favour – is Games For Windows LIVE dead in the water?



Reporter
Pavel Barter

RARELY DO OUR readers whip themselves into such a frenzy. "When you're running a Microsoft game on a Microsoft operating system," screams James Buxton in a recent inbox-rocking email, "and the game has to alt-tab out to a Microsoft internet browser to take you to a Microsoft website to create a Microsoft Games For Windows LIVE account – how on Earth does the game manage to crash? And wasn't Firefox my default browser?"

He's not the only one with his panties in a twist over Microsoft's solution to a problem few had. Games For Windows LIVE is the software giant's online gaming platform across which all of their

games may eventually run. Israeli tech news website NGOHQ.com is one of the service's most notable doubters, having set up a petition to boycott the thing outright. LIVE caters for only 26 countries – and Israel isn't one of them.

"The entire idea for this boycott is to create awareness," says Eran Badit a member of NGOHQ's site staff. "Microsoft wants to make LIVE into a global standard and collect additional fees for nothing. That's not OK, but somehow tolerable. The fact that this service is only available to 26 countries is unacceptable." Badit's thoughts are echoed across the web. Since launching its first GFWL-enabled title, *Halo 2*, in May 2007, the service has received more criticism than a pube-filled Mars Bar. "It's unfriendly, bloated and amateurish," says Badit. "The world's top software developer should have something much better."

TIERS FOR FEARS

The aspect of LIVE that gamers most raised eyebrows is its tiered payment system – the basic service is free, but LIVE's Gold service (which includes multiplayer achievements, matchmaking and the ability to hop into a game with your Xbox 360 brethren) will cost you £4.99 a month, or £39.99 a year. MMOs like *World of Warcraft* have been passing the collection box for years, but the traditional online FPS has long been maintained by clans and privately owned servers, not megacorps. PC gamers are used to getting their online kicks for free, so for Microsoft to start asking players to pony up cash was always going to cause controversy.

But before forming a lynch mob, bear in mind that LIVE isn't all about breaking the bank. "We weren't as clear as we should have been that Games for



No Red Ring just yet...

Windows LIVE on the PC is free," the service's Senior Director Kevin Unangst told Eurogamer.net. Indeed, on the Silver service, you can play online for free – minus cross-platform play, multiplayer achievements or matchmaking.

While Microsoft insist that their service is not an attempt to port Xbox LIVE to the PC (the two systems are separate), your *Windows* gamertag, the ability to keep track of the status of your friends and hoard achievements – not to mention the chunky interface – has 360 written all over it. Do desktop junkies really want to play games against couch potatoes? A lack of





enthusiasm surrounding cross-platform matches in RTS *Universe at War: Earth Assault* suggests not.

There's also no external interface and the service is only accessible through the in-game menus of the seven games it currently supports. Want friend invites when you're playing a game that doesn't support LIVE? Not gonna happen. Adding salt to the wound are connection problems, awkward updates and matchmaking queues like it's the January sales.

STEAMED OPEN

Anti-LIVE activists, meanwhile, have also got themselves tied up in knots over exclusivity. Microsoft insist that LIVE titles like *Halo 2* and *Shadowrun* require *Windows Vista* to run, but *Razor 1911* (one of the oldest software pirate groups on the net) proved them wrong when they created a crack that lets the game install in *XP* without *DirectX 10*.

Microsoft aren't helped by the fact that, comparatively, Valve's Steam service (steampowered.com) has become a public darling. "LIVE is not in the same league as Steam or Xfire," says Badit. "With Steam, you don't pay anything, except for the games. You can use it internationally. And of course, Steam and Xfire are far more stable."

Over time, Steam has won hearts and minds. The service has matchmaking and voice chat, like LIVE, but it also pops a friends list into your system tray, informing you of invites and events. It automatically patches your games, lets you organise clans and offers a dedicated service client. The recent Steamworks package allows developers to retrofit their games with Steam functionality and even add LIVE-esque achievements online and offline. In comparison, LIVE must be hard-coded into every game that uses it.

But remember, Steam suffered, Heather Mills levels of hate when it

Halo 2 wasn't the smartest game to pick to fly the GFWL flag.



"Microsoft aren't helped by Steam becoming a public darling..."

appeared in 2002 and is still accused of crimes against gaming. LIVE is still in its infancy, albeit with only seven games on its roster (including *Viva Pinata*, *Kane & Lynch* and *Universe at War*), compared to Steam's 250+, they'll need to get a move on before expecting people to start shelling out.

LIVE FOREVER?

For their part, Microsoft hope to improve LIVE and a fresh push for the Games for Windows brand is thought to be imminent. Kevin Unangst claims they're planning an online store, similar to the Xbox LIVE Marketplace. Even anti-LIVE activists are quick to suggest ways in which LIVE might live up to expectations. "What I want most from online gaming services is a completely

hassle-free purchase model for games," says Yemir, a staff member of game site Futuremark.com. "Just log in, browse and search the game list, and click on 'play'." And a streamlined online system can only lead to better games, reckons Josiah Pisciotta, of indie developer Chronic Logic. "Services like Windows LIVE and Steam are especially attractive," he says. "Their users are a more serious group of gamers than you find on a lot of portal sites, creating a much better market."

In all honesty, a small-scale boycott of the software giant's wares is unlikely to stop Microsoft in their tracks. You would hope, though, that somewhere in deepest Seattle battle-plans are being redrawn. Your move Mr Gates. Better make it a good one. **PCZ**

Notes from the forum

These are your opinions, reader, and you said them at the forums of www.pczone.co.uk

smokeymonkey

"I only have one game that uses LIVE, *Gears of War*. It took me a while to set up an account, I had to do it a couple of times to get it to work. As for the Gold/Silver membership, I refuse point blank to pay to play online because I already pay for the phone line and broadband for that privilege. The difference between the memberships looks like they are almost trying to punish those who are unwilling to fork out for the Gold."

Mad_AI

"I have four titles that support LIVE: *Halo 2*, *Kane & Lynch*, *Gears of War* and *Shadowrun*. I have subscribed to a Gold account, why I don't know, but it's pretty pointless in my opinion. I suppose I felt I was missing out on something as certain areas of the multiplayer game were out of bounds if you like. So really I wanted to know what I was missing, in the end it was just me sat in an empty game ladder. So be warned, get a Gold account if money is no object. If like hundreds of others you just want to play multiplayer then Silver is more than sufficient."

darth_careful

"Most PC games come with decent online support built-in, so LIVE simply replaces functionality that should be there anyway. And why the hell do LIVE games assume everyone is using an Xbox 360 controller? And what's that online-only saving in *Gears of War* all about? And who wants to re-create the console experience on their über-powerful PC anyway? It's all utterly marketing led, and is a blatant attempt to create synergies between the PC and Xbox. It just ends up dumbing down the PC experience, which is a bad, bad thing."



Is there anything you want Pavel Barter to investigate? (Warning: some jobs might be considered too big or too small...)

@ letters@pczone.co.uk
 ✉ pavel barter, pc zone,
 2 balcombe st, london, nw1 6nw

PCZONE Charts

- 1 **NEW** **ASSASSIN'S CREED**
Issue 194 72%
- 2 **FOOTBALL MANAGER 2008**
Issue 188 90%
- 3 **RE** **THE SIMS 2: FREETIME**
Issue 194 70%
- 4 **CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE**
Issue 188 89%
- 5 **NEW** **TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX: VEGAS 2**
Issue 194 83%
- 6 **WARHAMMER 40,000: DOW - SOULSTORM**
Issue 192 81%
- 7 **THE SIMS 2**
Issue 147 82%
- 8 **WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BATTLE CHEST**
N/A
- 9 **NEW** **THE SIMS: CASTAWAY STORIES**
Issue 193 48%
- 10 **COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WAR**
Issue 180 86%
- 11 **THE SIMS 2: BON VOYAGE**
Issue 188 38%
- 12 **CRYSIS**
Issue 188 92%
- 13 **RE** **CIVILIZATION IV COMPLETE**
N/A
- 14 **CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 2008**
Issue 188 72%
- 15 **MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR - GOLD EDITION**
Issue 175 91%
- 16 **RE** **THE ORANGE BOX**
N/A
- 17 **WORLD IN CONFLICT**
Issue 186 92%
- 18 **EMPIRE EARTH III**
Issue 189 72%
- 19 **SIMCITY SOCIETIES**
Issue 189 61%
- 20 **MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR**
Issue 175 91%

**ASSASSIN'S CREED**

First place goes to the new franchise. Now get a better sequel quickly Altair, because you were disappointing first time round.

**COMMAND & CONQUER 3**

Trilogies used to be all the rage, before *Alien* invented quadrilogies. Nowadays, stopping at three is the pussy's way out.

**THE SIMS 2**

Behold, the sequel-mother. All bow, as she pushes out an enormous diamond egg. How it hurts her, to pass these unnatural eggs!

**CALL OF DUTY 4**

Tradition dictates four is the last number, like when 486 changed to Pentium. What next, COD? And what's after Pentium 4?

A BATTLEFIELD REVOLUTION

EA could be *Heroes* for more than one day...

WEBSITE www.battlefield-heroes.com ETA Summer

BATTLEFIELD HEROES IS more interesting than its casual shooter mechanics and initial offering of two maps suggests. Grown from the desire to cut and paste the South Korean model of free games funded by micro-transactions, they don't want it to turn into an inquisitive download and a few days of play followed by an inevitable trip to the recycle bin. "To become a high-level character in *Battlefield Heroes* you'll have to put in as much time and effort as you do in an MMO," explains exec producer Ben Cousins. "Up to hundreds of hours..."

If you're mad keen on the game then you'll be able to purchase feathers for your cap, special trousers and ever twirlier moustaches with real-world money (through credit cards, PayPal, SMS billing and potentially even scratchcards in shops). But ability specialisation will come through levelling-up through gameplay, with a curve not a million miles from *WOW*'s model.

"You can't max out all your abilities, you have to make a strategic choice," says Cousins, explaining that he expects most players to have a main alongside up to three alternative characters. "You can have two entirely different level 50 Commandos; one really focussed on sniping, the other guy on stabbing."

Despite the promise of extra maps, factions, female character models and the like, having played the game we're still concerned it won't have the depth to become the timesink EA dearly wants it to become. Still, it's fascinating to watch a gaming gargantuan like EA departing from the traditional retail system - and the internet browser launch system is extremely slick. More next issue...



Fighting for Queen, country and funky bandanas.



IN THE SPOTLIGHT:

THE MAN WHO'S FLEEING US

ED DEL CASTILLO - PRESIDENT OF LIQUID ENTERTAINMENT



Having worked on RTS/role-playing fantasy hybrid *Dragonshard*, Ed del Castillo is on a crusade to "make RPGs better". In the new gory action/role-playing game *Rise of the Argonauts*, you play Jason on his quest for the Golden Fleece, and Castillo believes he's created a fully rewarding dialogue system...

Q Why are you unhappy with current RPG dialogue choices?

A Well, in every RPG that's ever shipped, there's a right choice, a wrong choice and a non-choice. I used to really enjoy playing the neutral guy, until I found out that the all the rewards came from making the good guy or bad guy choices I wasn't making. That's lame, because I'm not roleplaying any more - my brain switches away from roleplaying towards, "What's the right answer here? What gets me the most juice?"

So how have you improved on RPG dialogue?

We've created four distinct personalities for Jason to play, all based around gods. There's the Aries choice, which is always action over words; the Athena choice which is more righteous and just; the Apollo choice, that's more inquisitive and knowledge-seeking; and the Hermes choice is outwitting the person you're talking to. You'll notice I didn't include any emotions with those personality descriptions - all of them can be angry, all can be sad, but depending on which

way you go, we reward you equally but differently for each, with a god "favour" depending on who you choose. You'll be suitably rewarded whatever choice you make - you'll never have to work out which gives you more good or evil, Jedi or Sith...

How does this work in *Rise of the Argonauts*?

When you complete a favour for a particular god, you get a point to spend in the skill tree of that god, unlocking powers specific to them - and those powers are related in combat to a certain weapon type. So, Apollo is the shield, Athena is the spear, Hermes is the sword, and Aries is the mace. So the choices you make in dialogue effect your combat development.

How else do you feel you are improving RPGs with this game?

We don't introduce characters that you're not going to use! If you see a character in the world, especially one that gets a name, they'll have their own

It's like 300, only without the midgets and slo-mo queen nipples.



story to tell - it might only be a tiny vignette, but we'll use it to drive the main plot. You won't get any cardboard 2D merchants that you interact with once and never see again. We're also doing a lot of what we're calling 'active dialogues', where you think you're going to say something, but do something instead - there's a dialogue reply to an Ionian soldier which says "No more talking," and Jason just punches the guy!

tat Zone

Thrusting the undesirable on anyone who'll have it

When you look for the PCZoners tag on eBay, it is like the film *Jumanji*. Only instead of wild creatures, there is a world of feral merchandise and PR freebies, where T-shirts forage for food with their predators, the branded coffee mug. What do you have to do to invite this world, and Robin Williams, into your home? Simply bid jaw-dropping sums of cash on the ridiculous shit we sell in our eBay account. And it's all for charity, so... shut up.

Buy our tat at www.ebay.co.uk
All proceeds go to charity. Honest, just visit entertainmentsoftwarecharity.org/home.aspx



THIS MONTH'S TAT



LEFT 4 DEAD T-SHIRT
A eye-popping rarity, this - an XL T-shirt we'd actually wear ourselves.



MASS EFFECT T-SHIRT
Even this XL T-shirt isn't bad. What's going on? And with a soundtrack CD!



NVIDIA PAD AND FOREIGN NEWSPAPER
Special offer! Twin tat attack! Celebrate!



BATTLEFORGE BOOSTER PACK
Labelled "GPM '08". If you understand, buy it!

THE TAT BOARD

COMPARE	ITEM TITLE	SOLD FOR	BIDS
	WARHAMMER NOTEPAD AND PEN Record your purchase of this riotepad, with this notepad.	£31	15
	WARHAMMER HAT This delightful hat will dull one punter's scalp to the even most vigorous patting.	£16	10
	WARHAMMER BAG This bag can hold over 2,000 dice, enough for a fairly sizeable skirmish.	£23.50	9
	WARHAMMER T-SHIRT Combining all these items slightly increases your chances of getting bullied.	£21	10



ARGUE THE TOSS

THIS MONTH:
FALLOUT 3



Dear Mr Porter,

I know we've been defying the internet nay-sayers who think Bethesda will foul up the *Fallout* franchise with their big stupid hands, but I'm beginning to wonder if our optimism isn't misplaced. I never liked the action/stats combat hybrid in *Oblivion* and it looks like *Fallout's* going further in the same direction. I don't like Bethesda's dead-eyed character models and they're back with a vengeance. But worst, *TES's* dialogue has always been self-regarding shit, and won't that be death to a dark-humoured series like *Fallout*?

Jon "Log" Blyth

Dear Log,

I'm a Bethesda fan and I'm a *Fallout* fan – what can I say? In an alternate universe where Black Isle still existed and we were up to *Fallout 5* by now, I'm sure the games would have gravitated in the same somewhat consolified direction. But why naysay blindly when in reality the only alternative would have been to not have another *Fallout* game at all? In my head it's like a seminal film series being taken over by another director who'll bring his own style to the fore. Like Alfonso Cuarón doing a *Harry Potter*, or Jonathan Mostow doing *Terminator 3* (which was good!). **WP**

Dear Will,

I'm a fan of 10-pin bowling and ice cream, it doesn't mean I want someone to smash my face in with a skittle and drop a tub of Bailey's Häagen-Dazs down my keks. Emerge just a moment from your lovely dream world, wipe the desperate hope from your eyes, and entertain the notion that *Oblivion* was great – despite the absence of all the things that made *Fallout* great. I know Bethesda will have learned their lesson from the endless piss-takes of their wacky improvised AI dialogue, but the writing in *Oblivion* was often toe-curling by fantasy standards – and if you take that into the sci-fi genre, it's going to be 10 times as obvious. **JLB**

Dear Log,

Come on, that is completely unfair. For one thing dialogue in *Oblivion* wasn't half the priority it is in *Fallout*. Having so many NPCs in Cyrodiil diluted the wordsmith talents and as a rule conversations never went deeper than a two branched tree. In terms of over-arching storylines *Oblivion* was excellent – I refer you here to the Dark Brotherhood missions – and I expect a similar quality with *Fallout 3*. The main hinge to people's gripes with *FO3* isn't because of the talent of the people making it, but because the very nature of games and the games industry has changed since 1997. **WP**

Dear Will,

Oh, Will. I can't help it. I'm excited, but I'm nervous, too. It's making me lash out at all the people I love. Even with all the hope in the world, every reassuring thing I read about *Fallout 3* feels like a plaster on a neck stump. I'm instantly suspicious when people start saying statistically manipulative semi-lies, "there are over 500 endings". And I'm definitely not sure about that action-combat-shooty-zoom rubbish, either. **JLB**

Dear Log,

Is 'action-combat-shooty-zoom' already trademarked? I think you may have stumbled on a whole new genre there... **WP**

PROTOTYPICAL

More details on Radical's free-roamer

WEBSITE www.prototypegame.com ETA Delayed to 2009

DETERMINED TO NOT only create a truly open-world game, *Prototype* developers Radical are also making sure that players don't become overcome with the many ways to finish a mission.

"If they're in a story mission, we want the biggest rewards, the sexiest rewards, to come from playing it a little bit like how we want them to," quips Radical's Chris Ansell as he showed us a mission in which 'sniffers' (army machines designed to hunt you down) had to be destroyed on the tops of various skyscrapers by whatever means you choose.

"As you go along, missions should train you as to what are the most effective weapons and vehicles that you can use, and what scenarios to use them in, so that when you get to an area you already have a vocabulary of what is most effective."

That's one of the big problems of fighting to survive in New York City – trying to deal with the menagerie of

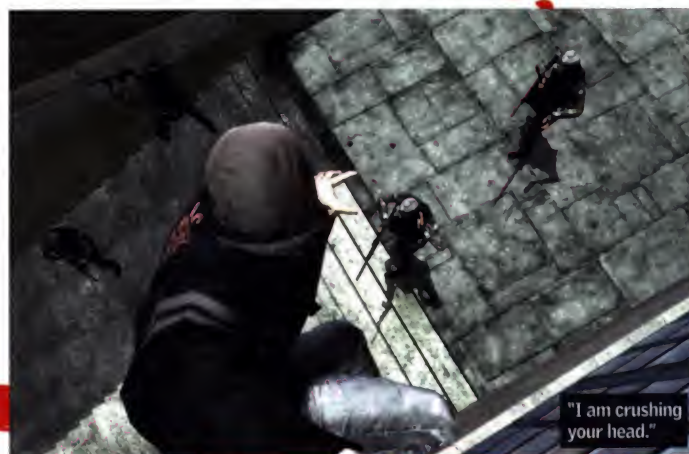
different things out to get you. Even smaller enemies can mob you viciously, especially in the case of the Infected.

"Their power is in numbers, but it starts getting really sexy when you have their mutated forms... they start to get powers similar to yours." There's even a possibility of there being a crossover of vicious, mutated military Infected, with Central Park a definite location for a colossal boss battle. There are also whispers of the military building an Eye of Sauron style device that will spot you whenever you break the skyline, and presumably call in heavy artillery.

"Our mantra is reality plus one fantastic element. We want to create something that feels like it could be real until things start blowing up and going really crazy," explains Ansell. "We've pre-thought where players will go and what they'll do, and we're encouraging them to try and play with the system – but with some challenge, of course."



"Well, you said 'no' to the suppository option."



"I am crushing your head."

THIRD PERSON PLURAL

Some of the mystery behind *They* is revealed

WEBSITE www.they-thegame.com ETA 2009

LAST MONTH, WE told you about *They* – an FPS mystery that combines the innate creepiness of children with the relentlessly awesome combination of robots and aliens. In justifying their claim that they've invented the 'FPS mystery' genre, the developers claim that mystery is rooted in dualism – the bringing together of familiar worlds and the unknown. True terror lies, they reason, in not knowing what the hell is going on. True enough – anyone who's played *Silent Hill* knows that the game's powerful dualism keeps you alarmed and baffled, right to the end. But *Silent Hill* also traded on your powerlessness, whereas *They* will have you blasting away like a *Half-Life 2: Deathmatch* veteran.

To be honest, *They* seems far more like an FPS horror title (games with creepy children will always find it hard not to be compared to *F.E.A.R.*) than the

publishers are admitting. The boy who opens your eyes to the invisible alien reality behind the robot uprising may not be such a gory Japanese cliché as Alma, but his motives and identity are likely to be just as much of a climax.

The sober mood of mysterious action is undermined a touch by the Pimp My Weapon feature. Although it's an interesting way to make one weapon serve a number of functions – you find upgrades as you search the levels, giving you a real reason to stray from the corridors – the phrase "Pimp My X" genuinely needs to be deleted from everyone's brains.

Developers Metropolis have designed their own engine to suit their needs (other engines, they say, will always limit you with the developers' original intentions), and whilst it's far too early to say much about the storyline, we can assure you that the combat feels engaging, the enemies show a great



DX9 *They*, or DX10? Who cares? It's looking good either way.

degree of co-operation and intelligence, and the visuals run beautifully, even at this un-optimised development stage. *They* looks so good, one magazine even (accidentally) used DirectX 9 shots to

show off the advantages of running it in DirectX 10 – which either shows how good the game's basic settings are, or how much of a sodden squib DX10 has been. You decide!



No creepy children here. But they will be lurking somewhere... waiting.

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SOMETHING'S COMING...

SPACE SIEGE

Jon Blyth spends some time in a room with Seth Walker. Actually, it's a whole bunch of rooms

DEVELOPER Gas Powered Games PUBLISHER Sega WEBSITE gaspowered.com PREVIOUSLY IN... 184

THE LOWDOWN

Emphasis on tactical action	✓
Mechanical eyeballs on offer	✓
Moral decisions	✓
Streamlined character development	✓
Will streamlined mean simple?	✗

SPACE SIEGE HAS a familiar enough story. Humans colonise another planet, get carried away with the whole idea that they've been given a clean slate to mess up, and plunder its resources to buggery and back. This disturbs a race of peculiarly vindictive insectoids, who slaughter everyone, before chasing them back to Earth and near wiping out the whole lot of us.

The hero of *Space Siege*, Seth, barely gets a chance to complete his tutorial before he's put into hypersleep. That's why you're naked and unarmed at the beginning of the game. You're not level one, you don't have amnesia, you're just a

tough human with sleep in his eyes. How he's going to get even tougher is a matter of urgency, because the situation he wakes up to has all the relentless oppression of *Battlestar Galactica* (Ron Moore's excellent revamp, not the '80s ultra-camp original) combined with all of the wholesale six-legged slaughter of *Starship Troopers*.

For the titular semi-sequel to Chris Taylor's previous hit *Dungeon Siege*, the buzzword that dominates the game's design is "streamlined". This is a word that's both promising and suspicious; in the right hands, streamlining can result in effortlessly intuitive gameplay that's satisfying in its cleverly concealed depth. In the wrong hands, you end up with an experience that is both patronising and unchallenging.

Character development is the most obvious area where simplicity

boiling down the labyrinthine skills and requirements of games like *WOW*.

CONTROL TWEAK

The controls have been simplified to fit on a mouse, but you'd be a glutton for punishment if you tried playing one-handed. Guns, grenades, melee combat and special abilities all have to be combined with a more manoeuvrable character than we're used to. Everything apart from melee combat requires you to point at the relevant area, whether it's leaping out of the line of fire or hurling a grenade into a distant crowd before dispatching the mob around you with an electric shock and a slice of your arm-mounted laser scythe. This feels like the good kind of streamlining – where the efficiency of design lets you fit more in.

One area which may feel lacking in comparison to the fantasy

"The buzzword that dominates the game's design is 'streamlined'. This word is promising and suspicious"

has been imposed. Brought cleverly into the sci-fi genre, the upgrade materials that fall from your enemies' bodies replace both currency and experience from *Dungeon Siege*. Take this accumulated wealth to an upgrade bank and you can turn it into cybernetic upgrades, or have the machinery convert your scrap into useful items, like health packs.

This is neat, it fits the canon and if you blur your eyes at the idea of insects shitting out the raw materials for health packs, it's a perfect way of

counterpart is your choice of character development. You don't roll a character – you're Seth, and that's that. You get to choose all your upgrades, but there aren't eight branches of magic, just as there aren't eight mutually exclusive branches of made-up science. Seth only really becomes your own once you've taken him some distance in, and refined his abilities to suit your game style.

The limitations of a map is a constraint of all games, but it's never more obvious than in dungeon crawls.



Clicking is still important.



But so are lots of other buttons.



Guns, too, are important.



As is staring at a wall with a mate.

THE STORY SO FAR... GAS POWERED GAMES

DUNGEON SIEGE

Dungeon Siege had strategy and clicking, but mainly clicking.

2002



SUPREME COMMANDER

The mech-led RTS with big robots.

2007



SPACE SIEGE

The game the rest of these pages are about. Read below.

2008



DEMIGOD

This god-themed RTS is heading for release this year as well.

2008

Goodbye, hardcore

But will it be hello, mainstream?

GPG claims *Space Siege* is less hardcore. But it's difficult to know exactly what this means, as a game that describes itself as for "hardcore gamers" causes the same bewildered blink as one whose developers describe it as "bonkers" or "the best".

In the case of *Space Siege* 'less hardcore' means fewer branches on fewer development trees, but there'll still be enough to play the game a few times with completely different builds.

And who won't want to finish the game as a cyber-monster? If only to watch your love interest run her fingers along your titanium spine.



Sexy software laser battles.

At least in *Space Siege*, you can feel like you're having an impact. Ageia Physics allows for (brace yourself) exploding barrels and flying gas canisters. They might be a cliché as well worn as Your Mum jokes, but a destructible room is a room that's more fun to be in. The satisfaction of wiping out a crowd of monsters with a chain barrel reaction hasn't faded since *Doom*, and I doubt it ever will.

Morality is also touched upon – and not in black and white decisions, but as a question of degree. That is, how much of your human self are you willing to give up to be more powerful? Just the legs? How about a spinal upgrade? And surely I can press you to a mechanical eye, Father? Whereas it's philosophically simplistic to suggest that the essence of humanity lies in not upgrading your kneecaps, it's good to see morality dealt with in a way that's not the

infantile kill-or-cuddle dilemma we're becoming used to.

BORG ME UP

You can make yourself 95 per cent metal, but if you want to take the challenging human route, you can upgrade your pet robot, HR-V. The largely autonomous party members and formation tactics of *Dungeon Siege* have been replaced by a trusty helper robot, which gives him a chance to develop more personality than your typical hired mercenary.

Space Siege plays with a healthy dose of strategy and even a touch of arcade-style skill. In a genre that can be dominated by right-clicking with one hand and drying your nail varnish with the other, *Space Siege* feels like it's got at least one more string to its bow, and throwing off the fantasy trappings might let us see if the dated dungeon crawl genre actually looks good naked. **PCZ**



Microsoft



TECMO

COMING IN JUNE

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BULLET IN THE DEAD

Will Porter becomes the latest unsuspecting bystander to become infected by Left 4 Dead

WEBSITE www.l4d.com ETA Q4

NOW USUALLY WHEN you chuck a Molotov cocktail in a game it results in a couple of your foes wandering around while on fire. Not so in *Left 4 Dead*. Valve's latest has petrol bombs that act like the real thing – covering an entire room's worth of floorspace with scorching, visibility-stealing flames. This is how your correspondent accidentally ignited three of his friends and about 20 screaming, galloping zombies at the exactly the same time in a previously deserted boiler room. Team-mates were angered, representatives from

Valve held their heads in their hands, everybody died. Sorry guys.

The disaster happened inside something that's new to *L4D*: stand-off areas in which hordes of zombie-kind are summoned through the press of a button. Turning on a window cleaner's lift, for example, that takes an age to descend to your level and has squeaky gears that prove an inexplicable zombie attractant.

In recent months, an added awareness of the rhythm of zombie movies has infiltrated the game. Intricate pacing has always been a Valve byword, but now the balance is finer. The safety of the reloading and equipment areas is

just as important in the process of keeping your adrenaline pumping as the vast areas where you're at the mercy of the zombies' AI director. Tooling up and moving out is just as important as running away and screaming.

It's pretty much impossible to play *L4D* without whooping and swearing – it's unending in its non-scripted surprises. Whether it's seeing a friend charge round a corner straight into the blubbery explosion of a boomer and then drip with its gore as zombies pile around a corner to eviscerate her, or simply closing a door and watch the slaving braindead punch holes in it – levels are an unceasing and outright delight. Importantly, friendly fire is never turned off – bullets *will* strike your team-mates. In fact, this was aptly demonstrated when I'd been pinned down by an angry businessman with half a face, and was desperately firing off pistol shots while flat on my back. The lovely Zoe got the full force of my ineptitude – straight in the gullet.

No shadow of a lie, *Left 4 Dead* is as good as you want it to be. It's becoming increasingly apparent that any shit game can be rendered half-decent by the addition of co-operative play, but no FPS has ever had it balanced or paced this well. Or has ever been built entirely around the concept, come to that. Later this year the dead shall rise, and together we will rejoice. **WZ**

Friends will be friends; right to the end.

Honestly, these zombies clamber over anything...

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MMO WARFARE TO GET A HAMMERING

Ed Zitron allies with EA Mythic's Jeff Hickman to learn all he can about realm vs realm combat in *Warhammer Online*...

WEBSITE war-europe.com ETA Autumn

THERE'S A BIT OF stigma towards player vs player combat these days, mostly centred around how selfish it's become – you kill other players, you get a reward, and you use it to upgrade yourself. Not so in *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*, by *Dark Age of Camelot* developers EA Mythic, the guys who invented realm vs realm warfare.

"Our RvR features are beyond what other games offer in PvP," explains Jeff Hickman. "We want to capture anyone who likes competitive gaming. Whether they're MMO or FPS players, we have a game that they can play and enjoy."

Warhammer Online is pitched as an accessible MMO for newcomers to the

setting and fervent fans of the pen-and-paper RPG and wargames the MMO is based on. "We want those people who have always played the table-top *Warhammer* game to play *AOR* and see it come to life, and how well we've realised that universe in doing so."

That means that the game has to cater to a lot of different people and a lot of play styles, from the ones that focus on trying to hack apart your fellow man to the more placid desire to exercise one's virtual legs on an electronic treadmill for hours on end. "Even though we put a lot of effort into RvR and our unique features we have a great fully-featured MMO, great quests, great dungeons, great loot, great armour –

all those things that you'd expect from an MMO, we've got," adds Hickman.

There're going to be – and fairly – a lot of comparisons to *WOW*, because *AOR* is a fantasy MMO, with hotkeyed abilities and elves to have cybersex with. Mythic fully admit that there are certain things the genre expects of the game and that *AOR* will have them, but they'll also be touting original features like public quests. These are gigantic, story-based adventures that anyone can walk into, join in, and get experience and renown from. Hickman's sure the rest of the industry will be using them in a few years, "They'd be stupid not to – they're so good in the game."

Things like bounty hunter questlines, which have you doing both RvR and normal NPC-killing as part of one jaunt, are all part of Mythic's grand goal to make online RPG fighting less of a chore and attract the reticent to its mothering arms. "You can get in and within 15 to 20 minutes participate in a meaningful PvP session that actually has an impact on the world and helps you progress."

Potentially, *AOR* could be a hugely successful game, a more rounded, cogent *WOW* with the ability to really fight a war, rather than being a grumbling, lonely curmudgeon on the battlefield. Roll on autumn, when we'll have the definitive verdict. **PCZ**

Behold the inevitable city.

Strike a pose.

Arriving in Doncaster, Mungo finally felt at home.

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1



PRINCE OF PERSIA

DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montreal PUBLISHER
Ubisoft WEBSITE www.ubisoft.com ETA 2008

7



THAT'S A WORKING TITLE, by the way, as this game is still early enough into development that you could harvest it for stem cells without God batting a celestial eyelid.

As for why you should be excited about it? Well imagine *Prince of Persia* crossed with *Ico* and *Okami*, all cel-shaded and hand-drawn. Then open the gameplay up to allow for one huge, cohesive world rather than the level-based palaces of old. This isn't just *Prince* with a new hat on; it's an entirely new breed of *Prince* altogether, and one we can't wait to make run up a wall.

2



3



4



5

The Bigger Picture

1 FORMERLY KNOWN AS...

Inspired by such notable adventure-seekers as Sinbad, Han Solo and Aragorn, the new Prince will find himself battling to restore light to ancient Persia.

2 GLOVER

The new Prince can't reverse time, but his new trick will come in the form of this claw-like gauntlet. Using this he can control his falls with absolute precision.

3 EXPANSIVE

Gone are the elaborate palace interiors of old, replaced with an ancient non-linear world – probably not terribly unlike the developer's previous title, *Assassin's Creed*.

4 DUELISM

Rather than fighting hordes of enemies at once, the game will focus more on epic Errol Flynn-style duels against hardened enemies, making every fight count.

5 FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT

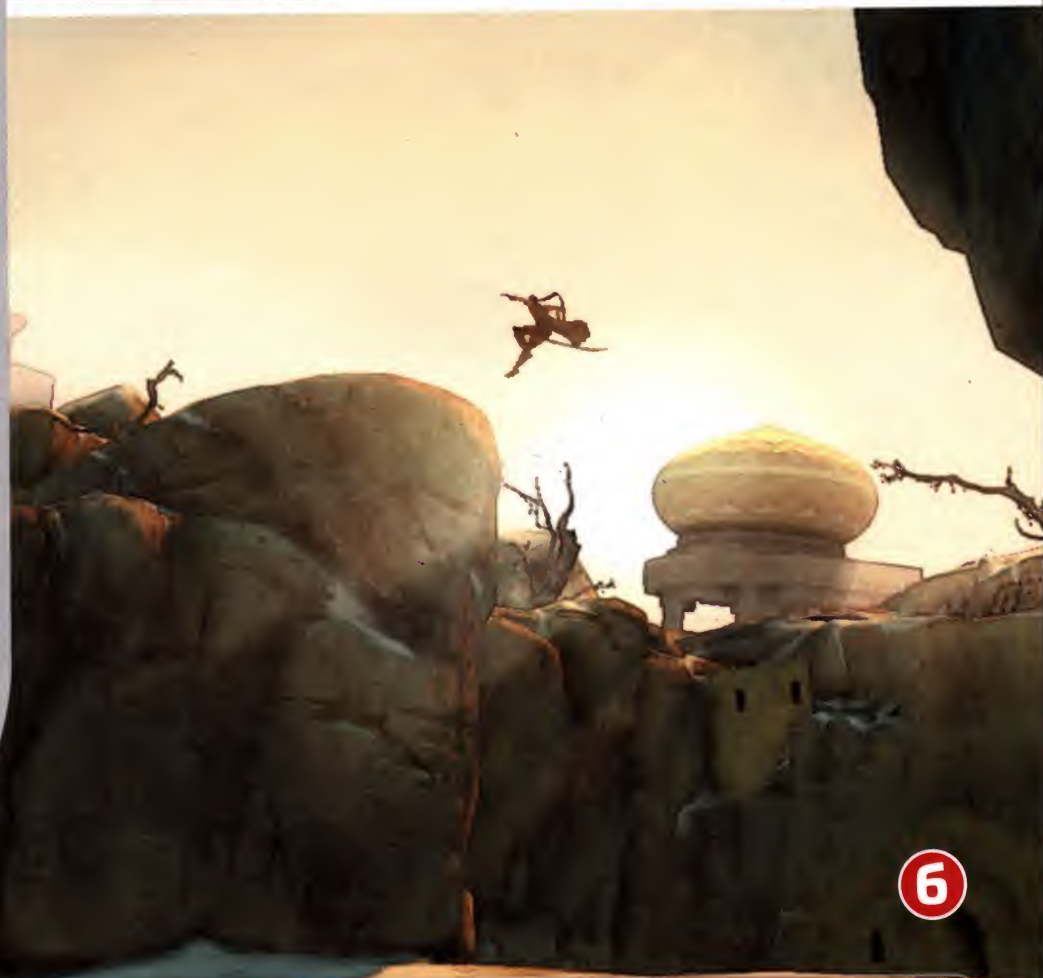
The Prince will meet allies on his travels, who'll be important to both the story and the gameplay. Ubisoft Montreal are claiming they're focusing most of their effort on AI.

6 CORRUPTION

Environments will vary from 'safe' areas to dark, corrupted areas. An organic corruption system means this decay will creep through the world as a living substance, challenging and interacting with the Prince.

7 CREEDY BUGGER

The game will use an updated version of *Assassin's Creed* engine, allowing for meticulously hand-sculpted animations and incredible outdoor visuals like these.



6

**LEARN
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WOW:TCG TUTORIAL
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PARTY GAMES

"Higher! Lower!" screams the audience as *Will Porter* frantically puts his buffs in order



THOSE PERTURBED BY the prospect of a complicated cardboard variation of their favourite gaming grind apparently need not fear.

"I like to think that we've struck the right balance of the whole 'a minute to learn, a lifetime to master' thing," explains game designer Danny Mandel as we discuss the various reasons I should re-commit myself to trading card gaming world, since giving up on the *Star Wars Customizable Card Game* during the vinegar strokes of my A level revision. (And selling Darth Vader for no less than £80, I might add.)

"The game boils down to a fight between your hero and your opponent's. Each hero has different attributes from the MMO. So, if you've got a Fire Mage you can Scorch, Fireball and Pyroblast your opponent to ashes. If you're a Warrior there are plenty of weapons to slice, stab, or smash with – and depending on your talent specialization you can use massive two-handers, a one-hander and a shield, or dual wield."

The card game isn't always a straight fight between two imaginary avatars either, just as in the real thing you can have a full-on party bundle through the medium of cards, bringing in allies and supporting your cardboard heroes with Paladins doing a spot of healing or Druids buffing stats with Mark of Gift of the Wild.

"Ultimately," continues Mandel "We've tried to keep the game as open-ended as possible while retaining the

fast and bloody nature of combat in the MMO." No room for /dance just yet though, eh?

CARD SHARKS

Mandel has been beaver away in the realms of trading card gaming for a fair while, knocking together Marvel's and DC's games and one based on *Pirates of the Caribbean* – but for a man with 11 concurrent *WOW* characters he speaks with the air of a man who's hit the nerd jackpot, peppering emails with knowing smileys when asked how much secret *Warcraft* stuff he's given access to. But how does he inject the feeling of such an all-encompassing world like Azeroth into a deck of cards?

"The challenge is that there's so much awesome content in the MMO it's hard to decide which parts to include and which to leave for expansions," he explains, referring to the various booster packs that hit comic book stores and PC gaming magazines on a regular basis. "The theme of our second year was *The Burning Crusade*. As such we included lots of demons, the Aldor and Stryfer factions, and a bunch of 'Traitor' heroes, who are a riff on Outland boss Illidan the Betrayer".

UNLOCK FRENZY

A major plus for *WOW* fanatics is the fact that occasionally a 19-card booster pack will contain some fantastic unlockable items to use in-game, a far cry from the days you'd buy a pack of Panini stickers in the hope you'd get that

fabled 'need' Gary Pallister instead of five 'got' John Fashanus.

"In each booster set, there are three different loot items to collect," explains Mandel. "The ones that get the most attention are the cool mounts (the turtle mount, the Spectral Tiger mount and the Rocket flying mount). Some other examples are cosmetic pets (a baby hippogryph, an exploding robot chicken and a baby gorilla), epic tabards, a fishing chair, an Onyxia kite, a personal weather machine, and pet food for your cosmetic pets (that makes them double in size!)." All the above are in demand – reflected in some stonking prices on eBay (see below).

The reach of the card game extends far beyond the virtual maps of Azeroth and Outland. The 2007 World Championship competition had a \$100,000 top prize, and there's a Battleground League that operates from friendly nerd emporiums for "weekly, semi-casual play". Which doesn't sound that casual – or indeed semi – to me. Every now and then, something called the Darkmoon Faire crops up as well, its tournaments acting as a competitive fulcrum for many and varied *WOW* events to swivel around – including the inevitable gang of cosplay Orc Shamans.

But where next though, card manufacturer to the great Blizzard? *StarCraft Snap?* *Diablo Old Maid?* "I'd love to work on both of those games! As for how they would play, I think that mostly depends on what kind of game

You can almost smell the testosterone.

You really should get those scales seen to love.



we're trying to make," finishes off Mandel, with a question side-stepping finesse worthy of Blizzard themselves.

"With the *WOW:TCG* we wanted to make a fast-paced battle game so we focused the main mechanics on combat and treated other facets of the MMO, like questing, more abstractly. But one could also imagine a *WOW:TCG* where each player takes turns completing quests or crafting new weapons and armour or exploring new areas."

If you reckon you've got enough time in your life to play *WOW* and *WOW:TCG* then there's a tutorial on our cover DVD. We've also got a free pack that you've probably poked by now. If we've started something unhealthy then we're sorry.

"The game lives beyond the map of Azeroth with championship matches and a Battleground league"

Loot stash

Just how do you get these wonderful toys? Behold the most recent in-game loot-joy that *WOW:TCG* has let loose upon the world. Of *Warcraft*.



PEDIGREE CHUM

Papa Hummel's Old-Fashioned Pet Biscuit will make your sidekick truly massive. Current asking price on eBay: £10.



POCKET ROCKET

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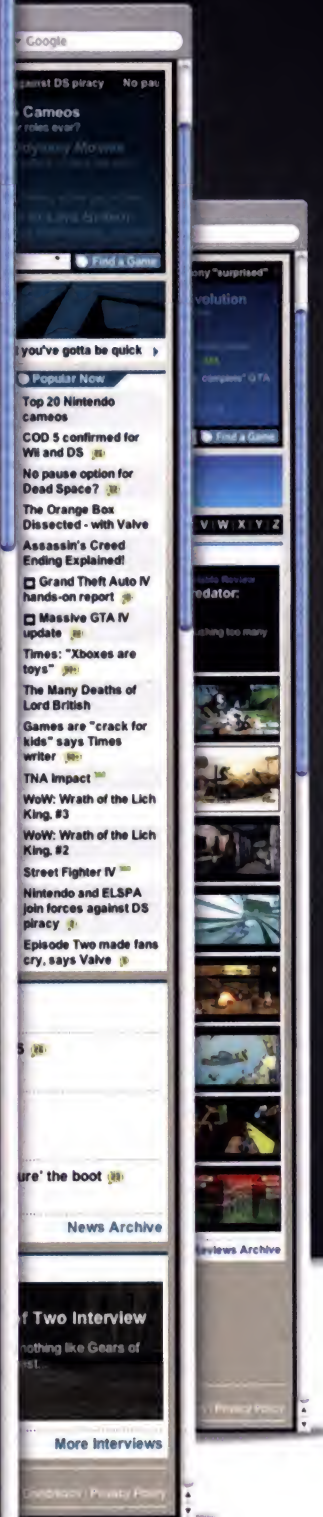
Grind getting you down? Then get your very own Personal Weather Maker! Current asking price on eBay: £30.



GRREAT! RIDE

The fabled Spectral Tiger. Guaranteed to create horrible, green-eyed jealousy. Current asking price on eBay: £815!

...SINCE **1981**





FREE FORM SHOOTER SPECIAL!

Where do you want to go today?

"NOTHING IS MORE difficult, and therefore more precious, than to be able to decide," claimed 'short man complex' creator Napoleon Bonaparte, before showing the essence of freedom by deciding to plough into Russia and freezing his army's legs off.

Still, the tyrannical tyke did have a point – although it was unlikely he was thinking about videogames. That feeling when you first booted up *Midwinter*, or *Captain Blood* or any of the *Elder Scrolls* games – that you were being transported to a place in which you could travel in any direction and apparently do whatever you pleased. Daunting, yet simultaneously enthralling.

Now, more than ever, free-form gaming is being matched by technology to fill in gaps previously reserved for your imagination with windswept grass, authentic birdsong and beautiful setting suns. And sometimes mutants.

We're on the verge of a sandbox playpen revolution, so let's deposit ourselves at a random spot on the map and see how far we can strafe...

Will Porter
Editor

UPFRONT OPEN WORLD



FREEDOM, BABY...

OPEN WORLD

Jamie Sefton flies a rocket, hang-glides off a cliff, and carjacks a vehicle to explore open

"Open-world gaming, pioneered by *Midwinter* and *Elite*, could be the industry's future"

TODD HOWARD, GAME director at Bethesda reckons gamers love freedom. "They feel more like the character they're playing," he explains. "They're doing what they want to do and not what you, the designer, wants them to do. The more open, the more reactive you can make it, the better the player experience."

Rather than presenting us with a thrilling, scripted rollercoaster ride, titles such as *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and

the forthcoming *Fallout 3* present us with vast worlds that we can inhabit, and decide what kind of character we want to be – whether it's a Redguard bard with penchant for alchemy or a lone Jet addict and his dog battling mutants in a post-nuclear wasteland.

Of course, no one is going to deny that linear games such as *Half-Life 2* and *Call of Duty 4* are any less than superb despite their on-rails nature, but over the next four pages and beyond, we're going to celebrate open-world gaming on PC – mammoth titles including *Midwinter* and *Grand Theft Auto*, plus new games such as *Armed Assault 2* and discover what it takes to deliver a living, breathing universe where the player is free to roam...

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

The first truly open-world game was made for the BBC Micro back in 1984 – David Braben and Ian Bell's *Elite*. Until then, space games were flat, 2D experiences where you were restricted to a choice of when to move your ship and fire laser bolts at ever-descending dot-matrix aliens. *Elite* created a

believable open-ended wire frame universe of planets, political systems, economies, trading routes and space stations, in which you could explore the galaxies and define your Commander Jameson – would you live the life of a bounty hunter, a miner, a trader or a pirate?

Soon after *Elite*, Mike Singleton, already a legend for creating the Tolkien-inspired *The Lords of Midnight* on the ZX Spectrum, delivered the seminal PC game *Midwinter* in 1989. Set in a snowy post-nuclear war wasteland, *Midwinter* had many innovations – it was one of the first solid-3D games on PC, allowed you to use more than 30 vehicles including hang gliders and snowmobiles, introduced a sniper rifle and was – revolutionary, this – completely non-linear. The player could locate, recruit and control any of the last survivors of the human race scattered over 160,000 square miles of terrain. "It was inspired by a desire to recreate an in-depth, free-roaming world where you have an almost infinite number of ways to approach the game and win it," says Singleton.

Even now, when many shooters rely on 'action bubble' mechanics to give a feeling





LDS

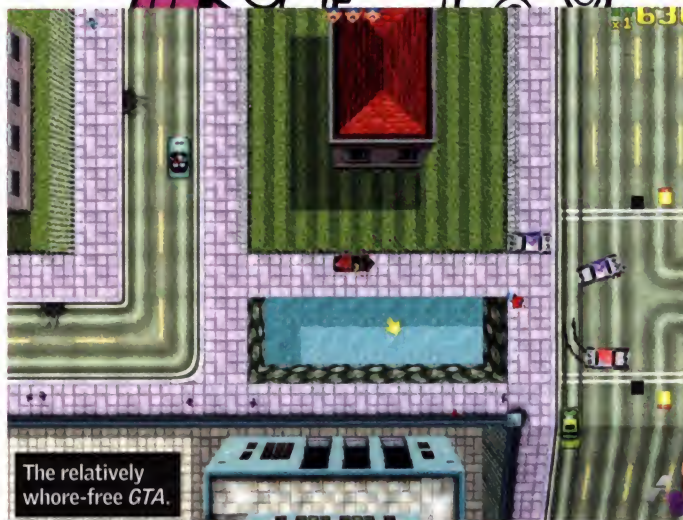
world gaming...

of the non-linear (such as *Far Cry* or *Crysis*) *Midwinter's* level of strategic depth is entirely remarkable.

Operation Flashpoint creators Bohemia Interactive's community manager Paul R. Statham, believes that giving gamers such freedom to express themselves within a virtual universe is infinitely more immersing because it taps into our "don't tell me what to do" mentality. Everybody wants to buck the rules in the real world, so in the virtual world it follows suit.

"In open-world games, if you're the one making decisions about how you approach an objective, how you complete that objective, who you complete it with and what weapons and transport you use, there's a much greater sense of satisfaction and greater sense of being on an adventure," says Statham. "Gamers have more of a feeling of 'that's me in the game doing that', rather than a sense that you're a disembodied character on a linear path with little possibility to really influence the events and surroundings."

Ed del Castillo (currently creating the action-RPG *Rise of the Argonauts*)



is another developer that believes the opportunities for open-world gaming, helped by pioneering games such as *Elite* and *Midwinter*, is the future for the industry. "I think we sometimes think arrogantly that we know better than the gamer, that we narrowly define their possible experiences, or we go the other way and create a sandbox game, which does a very poor job of creating interesting drama within the experience. Somewhere in the middle is the balance.

"We have to do more work, but it'll result in more interest for the players – they don't want to be led on a rail, because they can go to a movie for that. If we continue to insist that they play the game our way, then we'll continue to lose them."

GRAND THEFT SCROLLS

The year 1994 was a major one for PC gaming with the beginning of a role-playing series that would set standards for immersive 3D worlds: *The Elder Scrolls*. Beginning with *Arena* (which you can now download for free at the game's 10th Anniversary page at elderscrolls.com), which

A World of Problems

Creating open game environments can be a painful process...

Gamers now have high expectations when they pick up a new title for the first time. How frustrating is it when your in-game character inexplicably hits an invisible wall? Doesn't it jump you out of a game when an NPC character suddenly begins running in circles?

Dmitriy Yasenev, AI programmer in *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* and its prequel *Clear Sky*, is fully aware of the problems of bug-testing in open world games. "Open-ended worlds are challenging to debug - there are no corridors, so you have to take into account every possible situation which may occur. It's a time-devouring nightmare!" Paul R. Statham, community manager at developer Bohemia Interactive agrees: "The more complex your game is, the more choices are available to the gamer and the more things there are to go wrong. You need a huge team of beta-testers trying as many different things, in as many different ways as possible." And you wondered why *STALKER* took seven years to make...



For the love of God, give me moisturiser.



Deus Ex's hubs hinted at non-linear gameplay.



Elite - thrilling geometry.



Far Cry perfected the 'action bubble' feeling of freedom.



The sad eyes of self-aware AI.

"AI is one of the most important areas for enhancing open-world gaming"



Yeah, but where's our GTA IV, Rockstar?

was followed by *Daggerfall*, *Morrowind*, *Oblivion* and many expansion packs, Bethesda's series takes in the empire of Tamriel and otherworldly realms such as the Shivering Isles, with the player character able to be a number of races (including Orc, Dark Elf, Imperial and Nord) and classes (such as knight, bard and sorcerer).

"I think that perhaps, the *Elder Scrolls* series has most of all pushed the idea that massive scale can also be manageable," says Howard. "That all the little details can be done to an extreme, yet the whole world can still fit together and tell its own story as you wander through it."

Yet, a major consideration when making a freeform game such as *Oblivion* is the long development cycle. "One of the major problems you're battling with is the unyielding forward march of technology," says Statham.

"Consider that if you start developing a game in 2004 with the expectation of a four-year development cycle, what you can do in 2004 compared to 2008 is significantly different. You really have to get out that crystal ball and guestimate what the technology at the end of development will allow you to do."

Perhaps the gaming series that has coped with the development cycle problems best and done most for

sandbox gameplay is *Grand Theft Auto*. Launched in 1997 in a whirlwind of Max Clifford-generated controversy, the original developers DMA Design (who became Rockstar North) defined the free-roaming violent and vehicular action template with *GTA*.

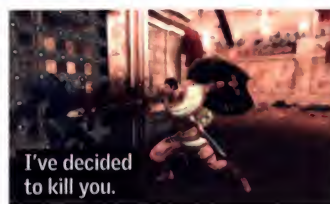
"Up until that point, with very few exceptions, the game world was passive, or at least offered only minimal interaction with the player such as falling blocks, rising spikes or, if you were very lucky, swinging ropes," says Brian Baglow, CEO of Indoctrimat PR, who worked for DMA Design. "GTA turned this on its head and made the player just another character in a whole world going about its daily business. The environment is not merely the setting for the action, but is an active part of the overall gameplay, which affects and reacts to the player as they progress."

In 2001, *Grand Theft Auto III* moved the series into 3D, becoming a true worldwide phenomenon in the process and spawning an entire genre of imitators from *Just Cause* to *Saint's Row*.

"It's frustrating though," adds Statham, "that if you consider *GTA IV* and the stuff they've crammed into Liberty City which allows for a phenomenal open-world gaming experience, that'll keep most gamers filled with wonderment for 100-plus hours, you still see comments on forums saying that graphically it's 'not up to much'."

Open World Games Timeline

From *Elite* to *Crysis*... Three decades of sandbox gaming



"That kind of attitude is a real problem for open-world game developers because, whether we like it or not, looks sell games."

ARMED REVOLUTION

In 2008, there are a glut of freeform shooters on the horizon – Ubisoft's Africa-based sequel to Crytek's original, *Far Cry 2* (page 56), GSC Game World's *STALKER* prequel *Clear Sky* (page 54), Bethesda's *Fallout 3* (page 46) and Bohemia Interactive's *Armed Assault 2* – and all these games are pushing the technology of open-world gaming into new territories.

In *Armed Assault 2*, for example, the development team is adding role-playing elements to the military simulator format, including a dynamic conversation system. "If an NPC witnesses something in the game, even if it's something the gamer doesn't see themselves, then the NPC

will remember," says Statham. "If, for example, an enemy squad moves through a town 20 miles from where the gamer is, the NPCs in the town will observe this."

"When you enter the town a couple of hours later, you can ask them if they've seen any enemy presence, and they'll tell you that they saw an enemy squad moving west about two hours ago – if they're friendly to you. Perhaps they know that you killed a civilian in the next town across, so they won't tell you anything at all, or they'll lie to you to set you up for an ambush by the enemy..."

Ed del Castillo believes that improving AI is one of the most important areas for enhancing open-world gaming. "The industry is talent-starved – we really need great coders and multi-dimensional people, as in order to have great AI, you need a person who can create systems that simulate life. That person needs to be someone introspective, philosophical,

and a viewer of people – working out how to fake salient features in people." Bethesda's Howard agrees: "I think it's become common for developers to be able to put lush scenery together, but creating other characters that can react to what you do in a believable and compelling way, is still very difficult. We have a long way to go."

Then of course, there are the MMOs – millions of individuals creating their own unique personalities, guilds and live events in huge, persistent game worlds. There are role-playing games including *EverQuest II* and the mighty *World of Warcraft*; community-driven racing games such as *rFactor*; MMO shooters including *Tabula Rasa* and the forthcoming *Huxley*; and the next generation of online urban adventures with *APB*, from Realtime Worlds, a company set up by Dave Jones, creative director of the original *Grand Theft Auto*.

Linear games are so last century – the future, it appears, is wide open. "We have the opportunity to show variety of choice, to let the player play the game he or she wants to play, and experience what they want to experience," says del Castillo. "The future of videogames isn't in storytelling, but in story-playing." **PCZ**

REAL WORLD...

CREATING A CITY THAT NEVER SLEEPS

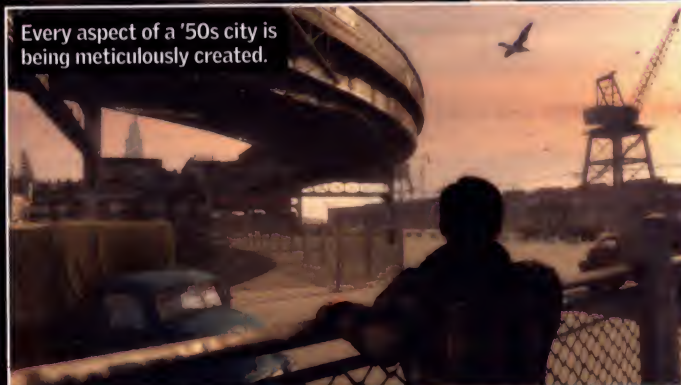
Jamie 'Donnie Brasco' Sefton goes undercover with 2K Czech to find out what it takes to build a living city...

DEVELOPER 2K Czech PUBLISHER 2K Games WEBSITE 2kgames.com/mafia2 PREVIOUSLY IN... 194

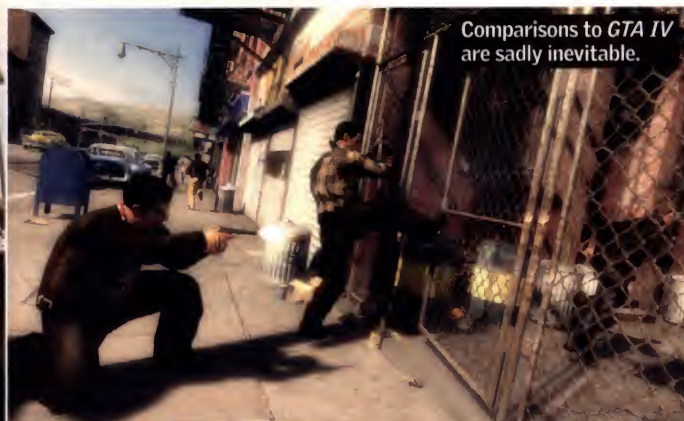
ETA
**SPRING
2009**



"Follow that small blue truck with boxes on!"



Every aspect of a '50s city is being meticulously created.



Comparisons to *GTA IV* are sadly inevitable.



IF YOU MISSED our world exclusive first look at *Mafia II* last issue, then shame on your family – a horse's head is winging its way to you by registered post right now. The sequel to *Mafia* is being developed by the game's original designers from Illusion Softworks (now 2K Czech), and is looking every bit the Tommy Gun-sprayed crime action-adventure.

Set in the '50s, in a fictional USA city modelled on New York, *Mafia II* sees you playing a new character called Vito who is dragged into a violent war between two rival families after being released from prison. Peppered throughout with references to gangster movies, *Mafia II* looks to continue the reputation for well-written snappy dialogue, great voice acting and free-roaming gameplay built on a solid storyline and entertaining missions.

SIM CITY

However, it's the living, breathing urban environment that will be the game's true star, and one that causes the most development headaches – especially with 'stiffness', according to the game's lead artist, Roman Hladik: "A city truly is a living, breathing organism. Cars have to drive around, ships have to sail on the

river, people have to walk and perform their daily routines, birds have to fly in the sky. The environment itself has to live with grass and trees moving in the wind, swirling trash on the pavement, sewers steaming... Any 'stiffness' in the computer-generated art creates an unnatural feeling."

Mafia II's city feels alive, with thousands of different NPCs carrying on with daily routines, stopping to chat, doing the shopping, buying a hot dog, using a phone booth – and if you look up at the buildings at night, you'll see the lights in rooms being turned on and off as people live their virtual lives.

"The whole city and all the interiors are full of prepared actions from which the NPCs choose as they walk the streets," continues lead designer Pavel Brzak. "If you take a look at the city, Lost Haven, in the original *Mafia* and then at Empire City in *Mafia II*, the mood of living city is just on a whole new level.

"Now you can see someone walking into the phone booth in one place, while another pedestrian is hailing a taxi nearby, while the whole time the guy across the street is buying a hot dog. The NPCs are also separated into various groups, such as rich and poor, so that you will not see an expensively dressed guy picking through the garbage.

"Saying that, we have had the occasional AI glitch, such as a homeless guy getting stuck in a dustbin!"

Clumsy bums aren't the only hazard when creating a city. 2K Czech have painstakingly researched the '50s America in which *Mafia II* is set (see Hotrods and Hot Dogs box) and have had to recreate realistic traffic AI.

"Unfortunately by the '50s, traffic was already almost as dense as today's, so we would have needed more memory and performance to accurately portray traffic patterns from that era," adds Brzak. "However, the good news is that this is a videogame first and foremost, so weaving through very dense traffic wouldn't have been much fun anyway!

In terms of pathfinding, the cars in the game are actually choosing their way randomly, although some specific vehicles are being pulled out of their normal random routines for specific tasks, like a taxi cab pausing by the walkway for a customer or a delivery truck stopping by a shop to allow workers to unload its cargo."

BADA-BING

Mafia was unfairly (but inevitably) compared to *Grand Theft Auto* on its release – on the surface it appears to be a sandbox game, but is in fact more of a linear, story-driven experience in numerous locations that happen to be in a freeform city.

"We're not competing with *GTA* in terms of size or quantity of things to do," says writer/director Daniel Vavra. "Instead we're trying to concentrate on delivering maximum quality on every single aspect our game. Which does not mean to say that the city is boring or that there will not be enough things to do. We've actually added a lot more side quests, events and locations, so if you want to go nuts, you definitely can."

Vavra believes that a balance of complete player freedom and narrative direction is the future for games such as *Mafia II*. "Linear narrative definitely gives you more absorbing experience but less freedom and smaller replay value, whereas sandbox gives you more freedom and toys for experimenting, but could get repetitive with time. We're trying to be somewhere in the middle. Enough freedom and replay value, but with a very strong movie experience in all the right places.

"With that said, *Mafia II* is less linear than the original game and we've designed missions that allow the player more freedom to complete them."

Mafia II is due out early next year – we'll wear concrete boots and matching overcoats if 2K Czech fail to deliver a sophisticated Cosa Nostra classic set in a living city... **PCZ**

Hotrods and Hot Dogs

Researching an American city from scratch...

Creating a complete, fully realised and believable '50s city was an almost overwhelming task for the development team: "We used contemporary movies, advertisements and an enormous amount of photos as reference material to help us understand the period. I think that all the incredible amount of time and effort spent understanding the era was well worth it," explains lead artist Roman Hladik.

One of the most surprising and unexpected outcomes of these studies of '50s Americana however, was a concept car that never made it to full factory production. "It looked very '50s sci-fi. We took it as an inspiration reference for one of the most individual cars that you'll be able to drive in the game."



The Fonz is a rumoured guest star.

FRACAS IN CARACAS

MERCENARIES 2: WORLD IN FLAMES**ETA
AUTUMN**

In the face of brewing tension between Venezuela and the USA, *Jamie Sefton* diplomatically blows lots of things up

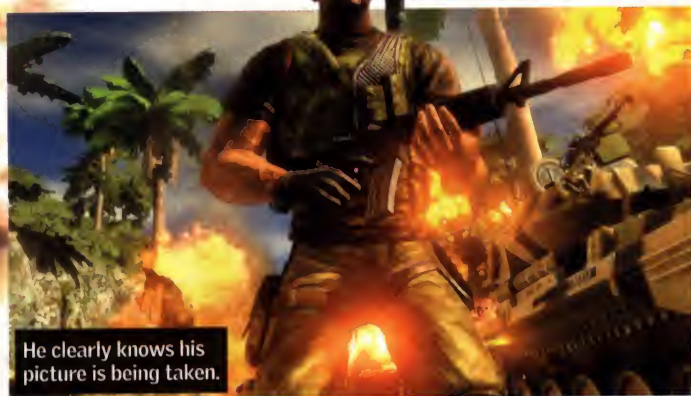
DEVELOPER Pandemic PUBLISHER EA WEBSITE pandemicstudios.com

THE LOWDOWN

Massive explosions	✓
Co-op campaign	✓
Huge open world to explore/destroy	✓
Destruction on a huge scale	✓
Console roots likely to show	✗



Explosion imminent.



He clearly knows his picture is being taken.

MERCENARIES 2: WORLD

In Flames has openly been described by developer Pandemic as a Bruckheimer-meets-Tarantino game – a no-nonsense action blockbuster with wise-talking bad-asses talking shit against a backdrop of insane fiery destruction.

While it can't be said to really be contributing to the intellectual maturity of the medium, there's always room for a big, lovable no-brains Labrador of a game to maintain equilibrium. So here we have a huge South American landscape to explore, missions you can complete any way you see fit, the most ridiculous OTT weaponry and vehicles known to humankind and an AC/DC reject who's been shot in the posterior.

CASH FOR KILLS

The original *Mercenaries* was a console-only game, but the

sequel's jump to multiple formats has to be seen as a good thing – especially for the PC, which has recently missed out on a few fairly decent console free-formers games such as *Crackdown* (by APB creators Realtime Worlds) and of course, *Grand Theft Auto IV*. *Mercenaries 2: World In Flames* is set in a fictional Venezuela, where a crime lord/terrorist called Ramon Solano has taken over the country by military coup and, along the way, has double-crossed a trio of mercenaries who are now bent on creating violent mischief and revenge. Another main hinge is that Solano has shot the bearded merc in the arse and payback is being sought for this injustice through the destruction of his entire country. Yes, it's that sort of game.

In the single-player campaign, you'll complete multi-objective missions for various clients for cash, and which factions you choose to support will influence the progression of the plot. While much of the campaign is still shrouded in secrecy, Pandemic have confirmed there'll be drop-in, drop-out co-op play for you and a friend, for Bonnie-and-Clyde-style mayhem (hopefully without their fate).

However, freedom is what *Mercs 2* is about – the ability to go anywhere, pick up any weapon, drive any vehicle and, importantly, destroy any building. Those nostalgic for the days of levelling an apartment block back in the days of *Syndicate Wars* will be trembling with anticipation as they raise the mini-nuke, direct it at a skyscraper and bring it down in a blinding fireball of destruction. Falling chunks of masonry and concrete will also aid the collapse of other buildings and smash anything in the area with the game's "crushing technology" – which is

possibly the best name for a branch of technology dreamed up in computer games in the last five years.

The chaos you can cause is unrestricted – you can actually reduce a major urban environment to smouldering rubble if you like – but remember that the idea of *Mercenaries 2* is to make money, so anarchist leanings may have to be tempered if you want hard cash in your bank account.

You'll need money to buy bigger weapons (mini-nukes aren't available at your local Tesco), and cooler vehicles, including tanks, trucks and helicopters – although you can always hijack them if you want, using *Mercenaries'* rather incongruous Bemani button-tapping minigames. You can also customise your vehicles with explosive toys, so if you want to beef up your luxury sports car with a rooftop rocket launcher, as well as that leopard skin seat-cover, you can.

LAND OF THE FREE

Mercs 2 has three mercenaries for you to play as during missions, each with different personalities and abilities – Chris is the cigar-chomping, brutal heavy-weapon guy, Mattias is the ZZ Top lookalike and agile shooter, and Jennifer is the beautiful, cold-blooded sniper. As well as being able to choose your hired killer, you can set up your own private security firm and recruit other hired goons, each with unique skills you can call on during missions.

The main gameplay involves accepting missions, ordering supply drops of vehicles and weapons, and destroying/capturing an unfortunate individual/building, along the way calling in air strikes or asking for an emergency helicopter airlift to a

(Not) Venezuela

The world of *Mercenaries 2: World In Flames*...

Mercenaries 2 is set in a fictional Venezuela, and has as much to do with the actual country as Borat has to do with Kazakhstan, even though some internet forum types believe the game is actually part a conspiracy to weaken the South American country in anticipation of a US invasion.

The game world is 8x8km and features urban landscapes with skyscrapers and populated areas, dense Amazon rainforest (for that essential tropical setting that we've already seen in *Far Cry*, *Just Cause* and *Crysis*), mountains, oceans and rivers. For the latter two environments, water is an active part of the game covering one third of the game's play area – you can swim, fly across it or use one of *Mercenaries 2's* many water-based craft to access secret islands and other areas hiding away dangerous criminals just waiting to be converted into cash.



Helicopter! Wow!



Tank! Yeah!

THE STORY SO FAR...
**PANDEMIC
STUDIOS**

FUTURE ARMY
Battlezone II: Combat Commander was their
ace PC game debut.

1999



MODERN ARMY
Full Spectrum Warrior
made up for the weak
Dark Reign 2.

2004

DROID ARMY
Star Wars: Battlefront
divided fans, but we
still awarded it 78%.

2004



NEW MODEL ARMY
EA buy Pandemic and
BioWare, along with
the *Mercenaries* IP.

2008



**FREE FORM
SHOOTER SPECIAL!**

D IN FLAMES

**"The chaos you can cause is unlimited
- you can reduce any building to rubble"**

girlfriend's house (SEMI-TOPICAL JOKE ALERT). How you complete missions is up to you - whether you storm in the front door with a tank, levelling anything in your way, or sneak round the perimeter and pick off foes one by one. Or grapple onto a helicopter and use it to drop bombs on them. Or fire an RPG from a nearby building to collapse everything on top of them. Or... you get the idea.

This game is the equivalent of a jazz riff, but a violent one - Miles Davis with a rocket launcher. *Mercenaries 2* lets you cause destruction on a ridiculous scale - and contrary to popular belief, that is both big and clever. **PCZ**



Venezuelan oil: useful for London public transport AND explosions.



Small pic, small beer.

ETA
AUTUMN**ROAM 101**

FALLOUT 3

THE LOWDOWN

It's <i>Fallout</i>	✓
Huge wasteland to explore	✓
Deeper conversation than <i>Oblivion</i>	✓
Dogmeat! Yay!	✓
Will shooter mechanics work?	✗

"It's too radioactive-y for crows," solemnly intones Will Porter. "It's just for me and my dog."

DEVELOPER Bethesda PUBLISHER Bethesda WEBSITE fallout.bethsoft.com PREVIOUSLY IN... 194

SITTING IN BETHESDA'S temporary European HQ in the heart of London's trendy Soho, just near the excellent Red Lion pub and some brothels, Bethesda's resident do-everything man Pete Hines is extolling the virtues of the free-roamer RPG.

"I could tell you what you'd be doing every single minute of *Call of Duty 4*," he begins. "Don't get me wrong – that game is fucking amazing, but I could tell you what happens in every minute of every single mission within very small parameters. What weapon you were using... everything."

"With *Fallout 3*, you could be 10 hours in and I couldn't even guess 20-30 per cent of what you'll have done. We made our reputation by doing big and crazy – things people hadn't tried

before. We feel that we've gotten good at it now."

This much is incontrovertible, the open-world structure of *Oblivion* was sometimes seamless to play through and the AI-driven daily routines of Cyrodiil's denizens a delight to play around with. The same will be true of *Fallout 3*, when you're out in the wastes.

"You could be walking along and there'll be a diner off to the side, you'll wonder what's over there – and it'll turn out to be a Raider base and there's mutated bodies hanging from the ceiling," explains Hines. "Suddenly the Raiders could show up – and that's just due to the time of day. If you want to play the game hardcore, you can sit and wait and watch these guys over a period of time and figure out what their schedule is – go in while they're out, or when they're sleeping."

BEGIN AGAIN

The start of the game though, as it was with *Oblivion*, will be inherently linear – although perhaps not in the temporal sense. There's probably no need to bore you with the way the action cuts in and out of various events of your childhood, nor with the fact that many of your perks, stats and abilities will be selected at various points within this. So let's just cut to the meat and reveal that when you're born, a left-click of your mouse will make you cry. And then, when you're a year old and escaping from your wire-fence playpen, the same button will make your character say stuff like, "Dadda!" No word if you can go rooting through Liam Neeson's cupboards and valiantly attempt to drink bleach just yet though.

As soon as you're out in the wilderness in your late teens, everything opens up before you – the landmass is smaller than that in *Oblivion*, but Bethesda insist that it won't necessarily feel that way.

"When you started *Oblivion* you had all these cities around that you knew about – you could travel all over the

The partially obscured town of Megaton.



Motion-blur means ANGRY!

Ghouls are bloody nippy for decayed people.



THE STORY SO FAR...
**THE FALLOUT
CANON**

BOOM TIME

The world blows up.
War never changes,
but the explosions do.

2077

WATER PALAVER

The Vault Dweller
searches for a water
chip to save his Vault.

2161

ARROYO AGONY

The VD's descendant
hunts for a GECK to
save his village.

2241

WHERE'S LIAM?

Liam Neeson buggers
off and you have to
find him.

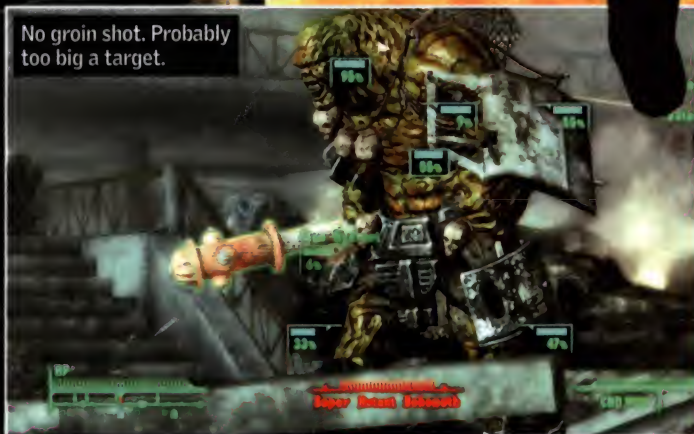
A bit later...



**FREE FORM
SHOOTER SPECIAL!**

"At the start of *Fallout 3*, you emerge from the vault and you don't know shit. You're not getting anywhere in a hurry"

No groin shot. Probably
too big a target.



"Dogmeat can help you out in combat or scavenge for food and weapons. But if he dies, then he's dead for good"

Fun facts

Randomly collated information that didn't fit elsewhere

- In the current build of *Fallout 3*, your mother, Katherine, who dies in childbirth, is voiced by lead designer Emil Paguilaro. And not very well.
- Your mother's favourite bit of scripture is the one in *Revelation of St John* about 'the Alpha and the Omega', which is most likely to be a theme of the game.
- Weapons degrade and jam much as they did in *System Shock 2*.
- Being a girl doesn't change much in the game, it's more of a flavour thing.
- Bethesda have generally only revealed updated versions of old *Fallout* beasts – but there are plenty of new ones in there. They'll fit in with the canon though, as Hines explains: "We don't just say, 'We need a beaver. Let's have a beaver.'"
- Ghouls can be your regular non-aggressive ones, feral or glowing. They move bloody quickly and glowing ones heal those around them with their radiation.
- The map and inventory won't be as clunky and Xbox-y as in *Oblivion*.
- Your head can get blown off.

The entirely non-obscured interior of the town of Megaton

improvement was marked – when bickering with a childhood bully there are at least six or seven different retorts to your foe, for example. We're also promised that there are at least 60 voice actors and that the more recognisable ones from *Oblivion* ("You have my ear, citizen!") haven't made the cut. Hines reckons they've nixed the old chestnut of conversation between NPCs being stilted and dull to boot.

GREETINGS!

"When they talk to each other they can do it by name," he explains. "They understand that this person is someone they have a certain sort of relationship with, and so they can talk about a certain set of things. When the player sees that, it's more realistic. The more we can do to make characters

believable when you walk past them, the better."

What of Dogmeat though? We touched on him last issue, but now his full range of capabilities has been laid bare. You talk to him as if he were a real person – no doubt causing a few raised eyebrows in the wastes – and can tell him to help out in combat, scavenge the vicinity for food, weaponry or stims (which could take him up to two in-game hours if hard pressed) or simply to head back to the entrance to Vault 101 and wait for you there. He won't level up or learn anything new ("He's just a dog," says Hines) but if he dies then he's dead for good – and you won't meet any other muscular, English-comprehending canines either. Dogmeat's a one-off.

"There are human companions as well," adds Hines by way of consolation. "It'll probably end up as one companion, so you can have a human and Dogmeat with you.

"What kind of companion you have depends on your karma and the karma of those willing to be your companion. The karma has to match up." Dogmeat

isn't fussy, as he's a dog. They're dim like that – Hitler had a dog, for example.

Sadly, there is some wavering in my worship at the *Fallout 3* shrine. These are more a few moments of disquiet rather than an outraged notice nailed to Bethesda's oaken doors, but a worry nonetheless. The last thing I was shown was an all-action piece set in a ruined Washington, starting at a battered Washington Monument (that you can climb to the top of) and ending with a Fatboy nuclear explosion battle in front of the Capitol building. Between these, beautifully imagined, tourist spots was a network of trenches where the Brotherhood of Steel and Super Mutant factions have warred for decades – now riven by trenches, tripmines and bomb scars. Bedecked in Power Armour (robbing you of perception and agility, but maxing out your bullet-soaking abilities) you'll fight your way through the area, but it did get me worrying how *Fallout 3* will work as a shooter.

All the time-halting VATS stuff still looks great, but what of the non-tactical shooting – will it feel as weighty as it should? Are Bethesda biting off more than they can chew when they enter the realm of the FPS? Time will tell, but the (admittedly max-ammo and max-stimpack) jaunt through the DC trenches didn't allay any fears. *Fallout 3* will still be roleplaying game of the year. After all – it's got Dogmeat in it! **PCZ**

Sadly, Bethesda are only releasing 360 screens. Thus the trigger signs.



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**BACK FROM
THE BRINK...**

STEPPING OUT OF DEEP SHADOWS

One open world,
easy on the bugs.Gorgeous vistas and
femme fatales...

Eat your heart out, Durdle Door...

**After the botched *Boiling Point*, Will Porter discovers
a developer on the cusp of outright redemption**

WHILE IT WAS largely for the wrong reasons, *Boiling Point: Road to Hell* was a memorable game to play. A clunky engine, hovering leopards with two frames of animation moving at the speed of sound... the game had a level of brokenness that genuinely made its innumerable flaws charming rather than infuriating. Patched up, it's now more than worth a play, but on release it made a dimple on the gaming landscape when it should have made a crater. Now the crazy Ukrainians who created its open-world oddness are back with two offerings, and they reckon they've nailed it this time.

"Even right now we can say that *White Gold* and *Precursors* look and play better than *Boiling Point* when it was shipped," explains Sergey Zabaryansky, Deep Shadows' director. "We consider free-form gameplay to be the genre of the future. Recently linear shooters have become boring and samey. A lot of developers are trying to surprise players with amazing graphics or great effects, but not necessarily with new ideas or unique gameplay."

BEYOND BOILING

Boiling Point itself was heavily researched and set within real-world Columbia and its troubled drug-tinged politics, but the country was renamed Realia for the American and European release – with a fair amount of near-the-knuckle elements replaced with slightly safer placeholders. This time round, with *White Gold*, we're in a similarly vague area – but certainly within a real-world setting: a part of the Caribbean which is packed with tanks, helicopter gunships and crystal-clear waters into which hopeful NPCs will

dangle their fishing rods before getting back to their daily AI routine.

With *White Gold*'s play area consisting of six large islands and 50 smaller ones dotted about them, you might think that you've seen similar free-roaming fare with games like *Just Cause*. What sets *White Gold* apart though, is its grounding in roleplay. You may well be able to drive tanks and nip around on quad bikes, but this Caribbean jet setting will be complemented by an inventory system straight out of *Deus Ex* and a full set of roleplay perks and experience. Whereas *Boiling Point* had a tendency to bury its stats, this time everything is simplified and upfront, with three upgrade slots for a myriad of different abilities – whether it's to do with chatting to the locals, skinning wildlife, better sniping or the sudden knowledge of how to throw a jar of jam into an enemy's face and watch him get covered by jungle-sized insects.

**"What sets *White Gold* apart,
is its grounding in roleplay"**

Meanwhile, next door...

***Precursors* – the space FPS that'll turn alien heads**

In simultaneous development with *White Gold* is *Precursors*, a game that's even more staggering in its post-*Boiling Point* balls-to-the-wall bravado. Mixing first-person spaceship combat with on-foot exploration of many and varied planets, it takes Deep Shadows' open-world faction-filled dynamics to altogether new and scary places.

Working on the same roleplaying template as its Caribbean cousin, only with *ExistenZ*-inspired organic alien weapons, *Precursors* is set to take you to brave new worlds of jungles, deserts, wrecked cities and interstellar combat of a *Freelancer* bent. We should have code in the coming months, so more as it happens...





Looks like a storm's coming.



FREE FORM SHOOTER SPECIAL!

Quickly now, I think
ELSPA hear me pirating.



The plot sees you getting to the root of a new variety of drug that proves fatal after a couple of uses that European kids are crazy about. This doesn't mean that there isn't space for arsing around in the tropics for an extended period of time though – you can even find an architect, get him to build you a house and pay him afterwards through *Animal Crossing*-style instalments. Once you've filled him up with your hard-earned cash you'll then be in a position to demand your own little pier for boats and a chopper landing pad.

JUNGLE FIGHTS

In all honesty, the combat and environmental destruction within *White Gold* is unlikely to match the likes of *Crysis* – but the charm of Deep Shadows' fare is more in their love of dropping you in at the deep end and having you working out just how far you can push the invisible boundaries of its make-it-up-as-you-go gameplay.

As with *Boiling Point*, there are many factions jostling for position within the playing area – and most NPCs will be allied to them, even if they're not machine-gunning each other. Shop owners, taxi drivers, local punks – all will judge you depending on your standing with the local cartels. The flora and fauna, meanwhile, is mostly there to look pretty or shoot at: sharks, leopards, snakes, piranhas and big scary spiders will chase after you, but parrots, chickens, rats and the like will also make an appearance.

So, are there any fears of an unfinished game appearing? "With *Boiling Point* there were lots of difficulties that kicked in during our beta stage, which were largely overlooked by our publisher who rushed the game into production," laments Sergey.

"We've now learned how to properly plan our tasks and identify possible difficulties so we can advance day by day with all our projects." What's more, fans of *Boiling Point* will be relieved to hear that the ability to walk into a bar, get steaming drunk and then stare lopsidedly at a scantily-clad lady will remain an important part of the game. God bless freedom in gaming. **PCZ**





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Stalkers now rest more realistically.

CLEVER BOYS...

A-LIFE LESS ORDINARY

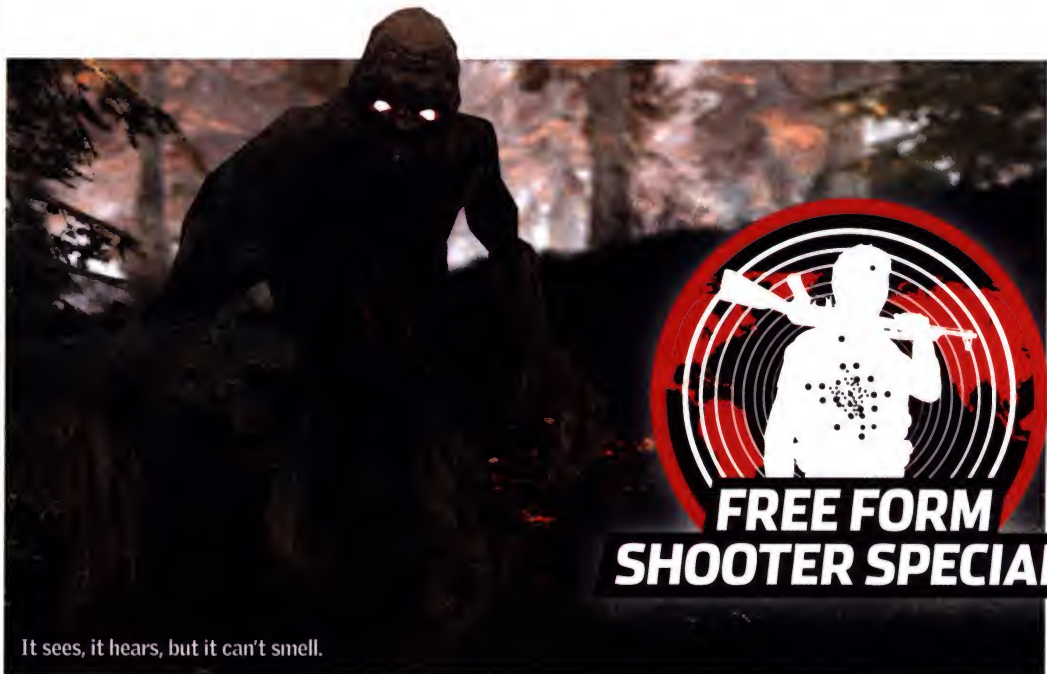
GSC Gameworld's AI supremo talks hunter and hunted in *STALKER* and *STALKER: Clear Sky* with Will Porter

DEVELOPER GSC Gameworld PUBLISHER Deep Silver WEBSITE www.stalker-game.com

AI is now more cover-aware.

Blue sky, crap camouflage.

A-Life means guard duty is rarely dull.



It sees, it hears, but it can't smell.

JUST STANDING WITHIN the game world of *STALKER* was often a captivating experience: listening to distant howls of mutated dogs and listening to the gentle clicks of a Geiger counter. No other game has delivered such a free-form, AI-driven landscape (or at least such an excellent illusion of it), so it's easy to assume that *STALKER* has stolen a march on the vast ecosystem of *Far Cry 2* by its inclusion of realistic predator behaviour – the latter with nary a lion or hyena in sight.

Not so, patiently explains GSC Gameworld's AI programmer Dmitriy Yasenev, because the complexities of self-governing behaviour run far deeper than that. "Basically, creatures in the *STALKER* systems are just imitating hunger and acting upon it – trying to hunt," he explains. "To construct a true system where creatures feel hunger and can die from it would be inordinately difficult to balance – how do you make sure all the creatures find food and don't die? Messing up the balance could result in deserted levels littered with creature corpses that have died from starvation – as such, in a game world like *STALKER*'s all the creatures are hunting for food but never die from hunger."

"Creatures in *STALKER* imitate hunger and act on it – by hunting"

Sitting ducks

Magnanimous in victory? Well, not really...

One of the coolest AI behaviours in *STALKER*: *SOC* was the way that after a battle between stalkers, the victors would calmly proceed to finish off the wounded with blasts to the head. How did that come about?

"At first we had no wounded state at all, people were either alive or dead," explains AI programmer Dmitriy Yasenev. "But then we added the wounded state and faced a new problem – sometimes stalkers would scurry around trying to find that one wounded guy during combat. The next step was to make them ignore unconscious enemies if there were other enemies around – but once combat was over the victors would all rush to the wounded to make a final shot. It was really funny – this five-man group scurrying around trying to find one nearly dead and motionless enemy to shoot. Ultimately, we created a system that chose just one stalker to finish off the enemy."

Therefore, while *Far Cry 2* sidesteps the issue by nixing non-human predators altogether and implants AI routines to suggest that the occasional lioness is ready to pounce from the long grass, everything in *STALKER* is at the top of the food chain. This isn't to say there aren't a few AI clevernesses to give the impression of a real ecosystem though.

"If you watch wildlife programmes you'll never see animals eating their prey in the open," explains Yasenev. "They always look for cover in trees, bushes or some caves. The same thing was programmed into the monsters' AI to make it more realistic and atmospheric to observe. After detecting a corpse or hunting down prey they'll look out for the closest appropriate cover and drag the food over."

FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

When *STALKER* was first touted, the mutated wildlife of Chernobyl would not only react in these ways, but also behave differently according to weather patterns, smell and occasional violent mass-migration due to reactor blow-outs.

"Yes, in the final version we only had sight and sound-based behaviour, and a few additions such as a day/night dependence where some monsters would sleep at night," confirms AI diva Yasenev. "With something like smell, it simply wasn't being used on the level of gameplay in the final product. Objects in *STALKER* have no smell, good nor bad, so as it turns out there was no need."

But what of the open world AI advances of *STALKER: Clear Sky*? Well, most of it lives and breathes within the strictly boys-only members clubs of the various warring factions of this Chernobyl prequel. The rather primitive factions of the first game have been given a complete intelligence revamp, alongside more distinct encampments and bases with various commanders,

mechanics, traders and gruff barkeepers therein.

"It's all driven by A-Life," explains Yasenev. "The factions fight over important 'points' within the Zone, whether it's territories, resources or scientific knowledge. You'll join your chosen faction and see and feel how your actions can help in their Zone-wide war." In fact, your actions and the A-Life system will create your various tasks through what's going on at the frontiers and how advanced you are through the faction's ranks – leading up to missions where you'll be leading assaults on enemy locations, possibly even trying to capture the base of a rival faction.

"We've also worked on a lot of the peaceful AI to make it work hand-in-hand with the environment," adds Yasenev. "There's a whole bunch of animations to liven things up and make NPCs behave more naturally in camps – they bend over campfires to see food being roasted, back off when they're in sudden danger, look up at you as you approach, walk around the camp to find somewhere to rest, patrol the area... and on top of that we've slipped in some nice little extras, specifically with artefact generation, weapons and gear upgrades that are all influenced by A-Life."

Clear Sky's clear intent is to mature the sometimes stilted gameplay and AI idiosyncrasies of the original (you won't be able to neatly sidestep a pack of marauding hounds this time for example, the AI will now be able to predict your strafing capabilities and limit canine turning circles) while simultaneously conjuring up something user-friendly and less obtuse.

At this stage of development, with GSC repeatedly assuring us that the game will appear on time and in complete form, it's hard to act the cynic. **PCZ**

UPFRONT **FARCRY2**

ENTER THE PLAINS...

FAR



FREE FORM SHOOTER SPECIAL!

CRY

Steve Hogarty blesses the rains down in Africa

DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montreal

PUBLISHER Ubisoft WEBSITE farcry.uk.ubi.com

ETA
AUTUMN

OPEN WORLDS AREN'T the next step in the evolution of the first-person shooter genre. At least that's what Ubisoft Montreal say, and they should know really, having been piecing together one of the things for God knows how long now. To them it's horses for courses, and *Far Cry 2* is the sort of horse who prefers a 12,500 acre chunk of Africa to a course.

That's 50km² of open world, passing gently from the sweltering humid day to the soothing moonlit night and populated with authentic flora, from the rough grass of the open savannah to the lush broad leaves of the jungle. A chance spark could set vast swathes of the dry landscape alight as flames spread and char the countryside, blown by dynamic virtual winds. This is part of a weather system that sees clouds grow and gusts tear through the game's valleys where brittle trees snap with the strain, their branches tumbling into the distance, swept up by the forces of nature.

This certainly sounds like the future to us though – a huge natural arena populated by AI that seemingly doesn't exist for your benefit. There's a sense of insignificance when playing *Far Cry 2*, a sense that things aren't being tailored to your whims and that you've simply fallen into this already perfectly functioning world. Just what are those AI zebra up to when you're not there?

BRAIN TRAINING

In fact, it's what AI routines get up to when they don't know you're watching

that makes *Far Cry 2* such an intriguing open-world adventure. Across 50km² of African desert, jungle and savannah, over 60 key locations will play host to some of the most well-developed AI grunts in gaming. They'll work together, bark orders, save wounded friends and panic when fired at – they'll also sleep, socialise and patrol while you're not around.

This isn't the first time we've been promised virtual enemies that have a nifty ability to out-think us, so noticing the look of incredulity on my face Ubisoft allow me to pick the brains of their AI creations myself.

And so it happens that I find myself standing on the grassy African plains, a light breeze



You won't be flying planes, but you'll certainly be burning them.



"Behind me the grassland unfolds, interrupted by the occasional tree and dirt mound. In every other direction lies lush, sprawling green foliage"

Open areas like this make sneaking difficult.



"Lunchtime, better get my arse to Pret a Manger."



FREE FORM SHOOTER SPECIAL!

Damn bugs

There's an even bigger killer loose in *Far Cry 2*...

"From the beginning of the game, one of the first things you've got to do is get your malaria medicine," explains Clint. "About every half hour you'll have a minor malaria attack – a visual effect telling you to take your medicine."

"As you treat your malaria your symptoms fade and become less severe and so your health increases. On one side you're getting more and more powerful because you're becoming more infamous, while on the other side you're becoming more powerful because your health is increasing."

"But depending on how you've been playing, you'll come across a critical point in your infamy progression where the people providing you with medicine won't want to deal with you any more because you're burning villagers, and that's not cool with them. So they say 'fuck off, no more medicine for you.'"

This, Ubisoft claim, is *Far Cry 2*'s underlying storyline – that of a man whose true power lies in his reputation, rather than his physical prowess.



Hammertime!



sending shimmering flaxy ripples across the land. I bring up my map, in the literal sense, holding a paper map in my left hand and a compass in my right, and scope out my objective: to destroy a radio tower a kilometre to the northwest. Fearing that running such a distance would cause my legs to snap at the knees and leave me at the mercy of some rowdy zebra, I head to a nearby camp where I'm promised a jeep will be waiting for me. While I procure some wheels, I ask Clint Hocking, *Far Cry 2*'s creative director, whether this rampantly unpredictable and unscripted AI is really worth all the effort.

"We don't view the unpredictability as being a problem for us," explains Hocking. "It would be a problem if we were trying to fall back on the philosophy that we want to be able to control the player's experience. What's cool for us is when you're playing the game and something totally unpredictable or improbable happens. That's where the real moments of excitement are. Sure it's great to have that scripted moment of the dude that slides underneath the truck and gets the perfect fucking sniper position," admits

the casually swearing developer. "Other games do that very well, but we don't have the ability to do it, and we never wanted the ability."

"We wanted the ability to have interesting collisions of systems that are surprising and fresh," Clint continues, "because if you're trying to fill up a 50km² world with cool stuff and you're doing it with 10 scripted behaviours, you're going to see those behaviours repeating a lot."

BUDDY UP

Still making my way towards these fabled AIs in my newly acquired jeep, I find myself in a sort of intermediary locale between the savannah and jungle. Behind me the grassland unfolds, interrupted by the occasional tree and dirt mound. In every other direction lies lush, sprawling green foliage. The vehicle can be repaired by your character at any time, lending it a certain permanence in the game world and reducing the chance of stranding yourself – far removed from the disposable vehicles of the original *Far Cry*. My character's phone rings – it's Frank, one of my buddies (in fact my best

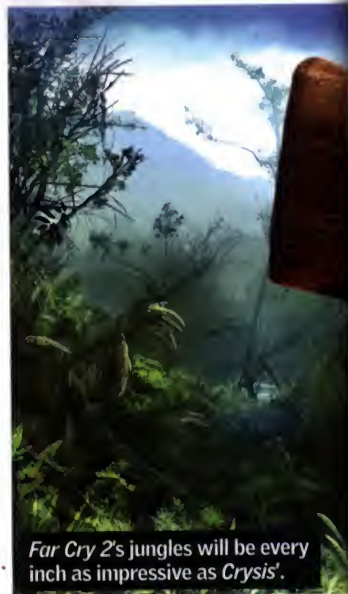
buddy, Hocking informs me). Frank wants to engage in a bit of mutual back scratching, proffering an alternative means of destroying the radio tower. He asks me to meet him at his safe house, not far from where I am.

"The way the buddy system works is pretty complicated," explains Hocking, "but basically what happens is you unlock buddies and do side missions for them. Buddies can also rescue you and offer you optional variations on the main missions." That's what Frank has in mind: instead of going straight to the radio tower, he's asking me to instead make a detour to a





What a lovely place to be shot.



Far Cry 2's jungles will be every inch as impressive as Crysis'.

Rocking out online

Far Cry 2 promises decent multiplayer support

"We're not talking too much about our multiplayer right now," admits Louis-Pierre Pharand, *Far Cry 2*'s producer, "but you can expect classic modes for 16 players, and basically all the cool ingredients you have in single player."

Far Cry 2's multiplayer maps currently support a maximum size of 1km², but with a 'bowling' of the terrain reducing the effective playable area to about 70 per cent of that – that is, the terrain will be shaped so that players can't run off or see the edge of the map. "Anyway," explains Pharand, "a one kilometre map is too big for 16 players. Most of our maps are smaller than that... and still plenty big."

"It'd be impossible for us to give players our editor," admits creative director Clint Hocking, "I mean, it's just so hardcore." What we'll be getting is a pared down, and far more intuitive level design tool.

"And this time we're prepared to support the modding community," laughs Pharand, from atop his wobbling pile of non-existent *Far Cry* mods.

Shoot friends in Africa.



There'll be a variety of vehicles, from jeeps to boats.



Time to stop sneaking.



nearby water pump system. By doing this the adjacent river will flood, drawing the attention of a faction commander away from the radio tower, thereby making that mission a whole lot easier. It's an entirely optional objective, and one which will increase my standing with Frank.

"Every time you work with a buddy," continues Clint, "or he rescues you, or you rescue him, that buddy's 'history rating' is increased. And as history ratings mount, the buddy with the best rating becomes your best buddy. He's the buddy who'll offer you the alternate ways of doing the main missions, while the other buddies are the guy's who'll rescue you."

The buddies' safe houses are places where you can rest and change the time of day (an action accompanied by a dramatic timelapse landscape photography effect), as well as stock up on ammunition, weapons and, once you complete certain missions, vehicles.

These safe houses appear right across the map, ensuring you're never too far from a place to call home for a night. Frank is there waiting for me and greets me with a thick Belfast accent as I walk in the door. To his right is Warren, another buddy of mine (so Hocking tells me, with the air of a psychiatrist talking to an amnesiac). These characters are picked randomly from a batch of 14 and depending on who I get, different missions will be made available.

In this sense, *Far Cry 2* will be a truly open-ended game – offering an incredible number of permutations of the story by randomly casting these guys in your game world. The main character himself is chosen by the player from this cast of characters and then logically subtracted from the world, so while there may be similarities in the kinds of missions being undertaken by any two players, the characters involved in that mission, and the way in which they affect that mission, will almost always be unique.

Whether or not this compromises the narrative direction can't be seen just yet, but Frank's broad, authentic accent is reassuring affirmation of the quality of the voice acting at least.

PUMP IT

Reaching the site of the water pump, I take the time to observe how the AI acts when they're unaware that somebody's peering at them down a sniper scope. They mill about, fulfilling their three base needs. Some are on duty, patrolling routes and guarding areas of interest. Others are resting, sitting down or napping in the shade. And some are talking and socialising. Had I the patience to wait here an hour or so, day would turn to night and the actions of my

enemies would change. Their need to rest would reach a sleepy tipping point, causing them to move indoors and find a bed. Those who need to guard will still do so, but they'll remain closer to their base.

Through observing these behaviours and predicting them, you'll gradually learn how to most effectively approach a situation. In this case, I shoot an unsuspecting man in the thigh, sending him cartwheeling to the floor. While a second guard struggles to hoist the wounded man over his shoulder, I take another shot, killing the helpful soul outright and returning his injured mate to the dusty ground. I'm slapped with a genuine pang of hot guilt – somehow I feel the idea of shooting a man who was desperately trying to save his friend came to mind all too easily.

"Having a generalised AI that can fight autonomously is a hard problem," admits Clint, "especially now that the world is so destructible and it's changing the navigation data all the time. But yeah, we've focussed on giving them various behaviours that make them look smart and cooperative. One of the great strengths of the AI in the original *Half-Life* is that they basically tell you what they're gonna do, like 'Alright! We're gonna stack up and go into this room one by one,' and sure enough they stack up and come in one by one – and the player is impressed."

This is the sort of cooperation that routs me from my sniper position, forcing me to sprint headlong into the base as potshots kick up the dirt around me. Diving behind a fence, I hammer the heal key – triggering a graphic first-person animation in which my character prides a bullet from his forearm using a Bowie knife. When I'm



FREE FORM SHOOTER SPECIAL!

"Far Cry 2 will be a truly open-ended game – offering an incredible number of permutations of the story"

Vying for power

Factions speak louder than words

Far Cry 2 is a stage for the political balancing acts of its in-game factions, and while some towns observe a ceasefire, most areas are hotly contested.

"Both the APR and the UFLL rose from the ashes following a bloody civil war between the equally corrupt government and a revolutionary movement," explains Patrick Redding, lead narrative designer at Ubisoft Montreal. "Deep-down, neither side is interested in governing the country. They are both armed gangs, bolstered by foreign mercenaries who originally came for the civil war, drawn by promises of diamonds."

Each of the factions is run by a warlord, who you'll no doubt be attempting to play off against one another through the course of the game. "The APR's Oliver Tambossa is a former major in the armed forces," explains Redding, "while the UFLL's Addi Mbantuwe was a labour organizer. Both of these men are principally interested in lining their own pockets."

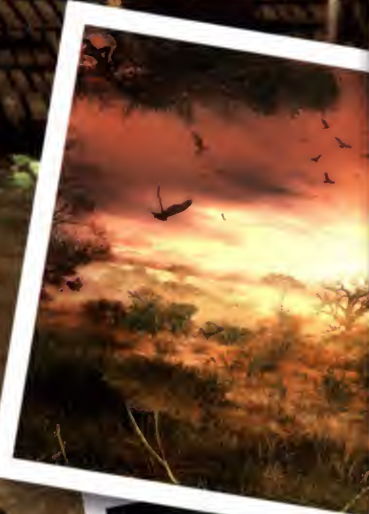
"Those few civilians who haven't managed to flee are essentially hostages in their own country, used by the factions as leverage with which to embezzle aid money from an indifferent West." Politics!



Just be grateful there
are no lions nearby.

Print Screen. Set as
Desktop Background.

"We've been left with little reason to doubt that Ubisoft have found the way forward for the open-world shooter"



The most exciting game
world ever... maybe.

Enemies can be distracted by flashy graphics.



eventually hurt beyond the healing skills of even the largest knife, my buddy Warren pops discreetly into existence, wading through a hail of gunfire to rescue me, laying down suppressive fire and carrying me to nearby cover. The loveable, unscripted bastard.

A LITTLE HELP

"When designing the buddies we hired Malcolm Clarke," explains Louis-Pierre Pharand, the game's producer. "Clarke is a cinematographer and scriptwriter who

used to do documentaries on African mercenaries in the '70s and '80s. He brainstormed with us for days, talking about people he'd met when filming.

"We wanted to have a great diversity in the avatars, so we've got guys who are 24 and guys who are 54. They come from all ethnicities and from all parts of the world. That's something Clarke told us is true of mercenaries: they come from all over. We have pretty dense and robust biographies on each character."

With a cast so varied, it was important for Ubisoft to source voice actors from the appropriate places. "If you're going to have a Sikh character who's been educated in London," says Hocking, "he has to have a pretty specific accent. It's really easy to parody it and have him sound like Apu. The last thing you want is the player to be in a really intense character moment where the buddy shows up to rescue him, and have that character say 'thank you, come again'. I mean fuck, it just wrecks it completely to be such a caricature.

"We recorded the warlords' voices in South Africa," adds Pharand, "we didn't just get some guy from Montreal. I think we're one of the first games to do this, but we've got our sound studio in Montreal hooked up with the voice actors in South Africa. We can analyse the peaks of his take and make him repeat some parts – it's as if he's in the booth with us. We wanted the flavour and it shows. I mean, when you go to briefings with these warlords and they're bickering, it just feels so authentic."

Far Cry 2 joyously slings its sloppy bucketfuls of variety about the place, not caring where it lands. In the short time I spent with it, I'd managed to blow up the water pump and head upstream in a motorboat before fighting my way

through a town of tribal huts. Perched on the side of a mountain (on top of which is the radio tower), the densely packed buildings offer a new style of combat. Rather than the long-distance scouting of the savannah, survival here becomes a matter of close-quarter shotgun proficiency. Using a flamethrower I set light to a rope bridge, which snaps and clatters against the rocky cliff walls, before spreading its fire to a nearby thatched roof and roasting an unlucky tribesman. I ended my African adventure with a hang glider assisted descent from the mountain top – a lofty and gentle ride on the breeze, which terrified the scarpering gazelle far below.

UNPREDICTABLE

That same wild variety and unpredictable AI makes it hard to know whether the mechanics and systems of *Far Cry 2* will eventually tire themselves out. As a shooter it feels as robust as *Far Cry*, often employing the same tactics of spotting unfriendly faces amongst the trees. In a game like this though, a sense of world-spanning cohesion and direction is one that can't be truly authenticated until you've piled many hours into it. Ubisoft are hoping, as Hocking said, that it will be the collision of the game systems – the propagating fires, the dynamic buddy system, the clever AI, the weather – that keeps every spoonful of this game as fresh as the last.

Having journeyed to their beautiful vision of the African countryside, we've been left with little reason to doubt that Ubisoft have found the way forward for the open-world shooter. *Far Cry 2* is a bold step away from convention in terms of its location and its trust in absolute player freedom. Ambitious ideas frolic in its grassy expanses. Solid, visceral

Diamonds are forever

They're also cockney slang for 'socks'

The only true and indisputable form of currency in the game is our old friend the diamond.

"The player receives diamonds as payment from the factions for taking on dirty, off-the-books assignments," explains lead narrative designer Patrick Redding, "and you spend those diamonds purchasing arms and equipment upgrades from the local weapons vendor. Through exploration, you can also find and collect diamonds in caches hidden around the game world." Weapons bought from vendors will also appear in safe houses.

Here are some more facts about diamonds. They're the hardest natural substance known. The only thing that can scratch a diamond is a diamond. The drill used to bore the Channel Tunnel was coated with diamonds. The word 'diamond' comes from the ancient Greek word 'adamas', which means 'invincible'.

Very expensive ice.



combat laps meekly at its watering holes. And zebra fill in the gaps.

In my opinion, it would take nothing short of a monumental cock up to cause *Far Cry 2* to be anything less than a contender for game of the year, mark these words. Ubisoft Montreal reckon the game's omnidirectional gameplay ethos might not be the logical progression for the genre, but if you don't find yourself completely won over by the notion of chasing a wide-eyed and mortally confused zebra and gazelle across the Serengeti in a Datsun, you're probably dead on the inside. **PCZ**

Finally, real-time grazing.





XBOX 360

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PCZONE REVIEW

Our verdict on the latest PC

Indie Miller

SOME GOOD STUFF, this month – we're coming out of post-Christmas hibernation. And not just with the big bloaty triple-A games like *Mass Effect* and the excellent *Race Driver: GRID*. *Trials 2* and *Penny Arcade Adventures* are brilliantly blurring the lines between Indie Zone and the main reviews section. Long may this continue – and let's hope *Penny Arcade*'s new digital publishing venture, Greenhouse, proves to be the hotbed for new talent that it says it's going to be.

Sadly, we had to pass up on another big review – the new fantasy MMO *Age of Conan* arrived too close to our deadline to give the game a fair review. Even with the opportunity to play the endgame content at the developer's studios, the process of getting to that endgame needs more analysis than we had time to give it.

However, we'll be playing the game over the next month, so read our impressions on the pczone.co.uk blog, where we'll be giving our views on the game before its big review next month. Does that sound fair to you? Lovely, now let's review some games.

Jon Blyth

Jon Blyth, staff writer

Must Buys!

PC ZONE Classics are hard to come by, and when you see one you should drop to the floor and refuse to move until someone buys you the game...



Crysis Sims of a Solar Empire The Orange Box

66 MASS EFFECT

Prepare to revel in intergalactic space sex shenanigans as *Mass Effect* touches down

The PC ZONE Awards



CLASSIC (90%+)
Games scoring in this bracket are air-punching, heart-soaring triumphs. Buy them.



RECOMMENDED (75-89%)
Head-turning, if not eye-popping, games. But then, who wants their eyes popped?



DUMP (0-19%)
PC ZONE's dirty protest. If a game is bad, we won't shirk our duty.

AND THE REST



ONLINE ONLY
Don't have an internet connection? Then you're wasting your time. Move along please.



EXPANSION PACK
See this and you're going to have to own the original to play the expansion. We know – life's not fair.



ON THE DVD
Good news! Check out the cover DVD for a playable demo or movie.

The PC ZONE gaming machine

As you'll see on the many pages of resplendent reviews that follow, we list the minimum specifications you need to play each game in each review. Please refer to the publisher's website to check out their recommended optimum specs that'll make the games super-whizzy. We review all new games on a variety of systems, including our top-spec, very desirable Xworks XB1-C2D, (pictured right). For more info on Xworks, tap into the wonder that is the Internet and type the following selection of letters into your browser: www.xworksinteractive.com.



ALSO REVIEWED

- 72 PENNY ARCADE ADVENTURES: ON THE RAIN-SLICK PRECIPICE OF DARKNESS**
Yes, they're taking the piss with that name.
- 74 EUROPA UNIVERSALIS: ROME**
For the gentleman strategist.
- 76 RACE DRIVER: GRID**
The latest bit of brum-brum.
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The finest anagram of FU, EA.
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A hit from the edge of indie.
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Giving the smaller games their chance to shine.
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PCZONE SWEARS...

- To only review code signed off by the publishers and the developers
- To give you our honest opinion. We're gamers. We love games. And we hate bad ones. Just like you
- To tell you if a company refuses to send a game to us before it's on sale. There's always a reason
- To hang up on companies who say that 79% isn't a good score. What do they know?
- To listen to you if you think we've got something wrong. Email us at letters@pczone.co.uk



Shepard: Sorry doesn't help your victims.



MASS EFFECT

The universe at risk and everything to play for, **Ed Zitron** dons his space lycra for the fight of his life...

DEVELOPER BioWare
PUBLISHER EA
WEBSITE masseffect.bioware.com
ETA 6 June
PRICE £34.99

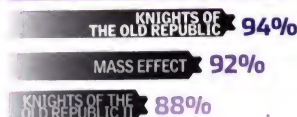


AT A GLANCE...

A classic BioWare RPG that improves immensely on its console cousin with excellent combat, an unforgettable story, and some fine space sex.

Minimum system requirements: 2.4GHz processor, 1GB RAM (2GB for Vista), and a 256MB video card. Due to draconian copy protection, the game won't work without a 'net connection.

HOW IT STACKS



THE EXCITEMENT IN the air was thick as toothpaste. *Mass Effect* has already established itself on the 360 as a classic RPG and one that corrects many of the complaints directed at BioWare's previous epics. Having twice played through the console version, the true source of my nervous excitement was to see this great game arrive on my platform of choice.

Porting a console game to PC is a process that can go very wrong – but thankfully *Mass Effect* reaches its apex on the PC. BioWare have made a game that flatters the PC's controls so perfectly that the 360 version feels, in comparison, as effective as a papier-mâché hammer. Gone without trace are the clunky UI and irksome combat of the 360 – with the mouse and keyboard, players can look forward to a smoother, more enjoyable and better-looking escapade than their sofa-bound siblings.

SURE SHOT

You take on the part of Shepard, a Commander in the Human Alliance. You can gently customise his looks with a few sliders, or leave him as the generic space stud from the front of the box.

He can be given one of three character histories. These will effect the occasional dialogue tree but, ultimately, don't have much meaning. Switching genders is an option too, but playing Ms Shepard doesn't make any impact on the storyline, unless you have sweaty palms for a spot of xenomorphic sapphic love. Once your face and upbringing have been set you're able to choose a class, and that's where you really get to nail down your own style.

There's a choice of three classes. Soldier places the focus of combat on gunplay and has you leading the party in a storm of precision shooting. The Adept class specialises in biotic powers – science-magic that will make *Star Wars* fans think of the Force, and demands a combat style that has you taking cover and popping out like an angry gopher to deliver your damage. Then there's the Engineer – a debuff class that lowers your enemies' defences, allowing party members to kill them more effectively. This is an unusual, and initially difficult, class to play.

At the game's start, you can also select one of three combo-classes: the Infiltrator – a gunner that specialises in long-range attacks, backed up with the

Engineer's debuffing; the awesome Vanguard – a balls-out warrior who blends the close-range attacks of the Soldier and the Adept; and the Sentinel, who focuses on defending and healing allies. The early stages of the latter can be challenging, but Sentinels' more powerful abilities – such as higher-end biotics – are more devastating than the most powerful guns.

SCRAPPY SHEPARD

Combat plays out a little like *Gears of War* – having you dash behind various barriers searching for cover and pressing forward to deliver damage and use and abuse your various sci-fi talents.

Oddly for BioWare, combat is all in real time – mostly. Unlike *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Jade Empire* you don't have the option to stack attacks up in a paused queue. The only time you can take a break from combat is when you give orders to your teammates. This stops the combat briefly, allowing you to target your teammate's opponents and designate the next attack you'd like your buddy to use. However, you never get to control their every move, as you can in *KOTOR* and *Jade Empire*. For this reason, you'll need to

A promotional image for the video game Mass Effect. In the center is Commander Shepard, a human male with short dark hair and a serious expression, wearing a dark, worn N7 military jacket. The jacket has a prominent white 'N7' logo on the chest with a red triangle to its right. To Shepard's left (viewer's right) is a Salarian, a blue-skinned alien with a long snout and large eyes. To Shepard's right (viewer's left) is a Geth, a mechanical being with a complex, multi-limbed head. The background is a fiery, orange-red environment. The overall tone is dramatic and action-oriented.

N7

***"Mass Effect has already established
itself on the Xbox 360 as a classic RPG"***

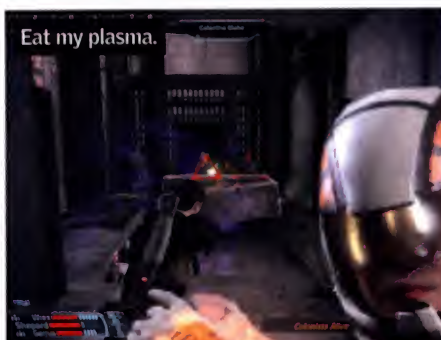


"On top of the first-rate combat, *Mass Effect* sports some of the most dramatic storytelling in gaming history"

Wrex and Captain Anderson's love was forever left unspoken.



Staring contest, me and you.



Eat my plasma.



Shepard vs the universe.

Mako Me Crazy

The worst vehicle in gaming history

While I'd love to say BioWare can do no wrong, whoever thought that the Mako was a good, or even a tolerable, idea was wrong. It's a six-wheeled monstrosity that bounces and cavorts around the landscape like a bouncy castle on wheels made of oranges, seemingly seeking out the roughest terrain and then bounding towards it, almost excited to see how far it can lumber away from your goal.

To add insult to injury, you occasionally have to drive it while simultaneously commanding its turrets and dodging enemy fire. This is troublesome as the bouncy handling makes aiming near-impossible unless you slow down to a crawl. This makes you a sitting duck and as your shields recharge so slowly, a very quickly dead duck. Worse still comes the few times when you have to drive near ominous mountain ledges while fighting, leading to hilarious, yet frustrating, deaths as one wheel accidentally bounces off of a random rock, flipping you in a circle and off a cliff.

Thankfully, the Mako isn't in the game much, but you'll very much notice when it is, as it's the one time that *Mass Effect* isn't a pleasure to play.



Steady now, steady.



Right, it's 11 o'clock. Get the hell out.



The galaxy map is easy to use and streamlined.



Hello, Earth-Clan.



Aim steadily, shoot quickly.



Character creation doesn't let you have a porn 'stache.

choose your class carefully to make sure you like its fighting style, as you'll be fighting a lot.

Most importantly though, fighting is fun. A common issue with *KOTOR* and *Jade Empire* was how floaty and distant combat felt, but in *Mass Effect* you can turn the tide of battle with a well-placed shot, cunning use of cover, using appropriate weaponry or manipulating distance to your advantage.

For a BioWare RPG, you feel shockingly in control of your battles. For example, the Vanguard specialises in short-range weapons like pistols and shotguns. Using the Throw ability (the biotic version of Force Push) you can slam an enemy down and give them a devastating gob of shrapnel.

I'd be going on a bit if I said that a mouse and keyboard will always beat a gamepad for accuracy and speed, but console veterans will find it hard to believe how much more control you have over Shepard and his cohorts, while those new to the game will find the controls natural and intuitive.

Once you've gained mastery of your squad, combat becomes a symphony of paused squad orders and real-time execution, and the thoughtful re-

interpretation of the UI allows for a new feeling of grace and satisfaction. You can forge a complex tactical battle with relative ease, which becomes incredibly valuable against the more unpleasant geth (lethal robots with a hive mind, and one of Shepard's major adversaries) found on the harder difficulty levels. You'll be forced to think on your feet, or lose your arse.

Thankfully, the tougher difficulties reward you with more experience, money and achievements, which many will be glad to hear aren't tied into Games For Windows LIVE. So the rewards are there, for those willing to throw themselves at the mercy of the game's more brutal settings.

TALK TO ME

On top of the first-rate combat, *Mass Effect* sports some of the most dramatic storytelling in gaming. Drew Karpyshyn's return (he was *KOTOR*'s lead writer) is a good sign, and his story of a band of heroes saving the universe from genocide is as rich in canonical sci-fi elements (or clichés, to the less charitable) as it is in brilliant characters and humanity.

As Shepard, you are made part of the elite Spectre Unit, and at the behest

On being a bastard

Morality in *Mass Effect* is a funny thing...

While you'll often find yourself choosing from the generic staples of good and evil in RPGs, *Mass Effect* brings a new middle ground – the space arse.

While you're also able to be a mass murderer or universe saviour, you can also mercilessly respond to people with sarcasm and insults, sucker punch a doctor, steal from people and even, in one case, tell somebody to turn to a life of drugs. You can stick a gun in the face of an adoring fan and threaten him with physical harm because he's bothering you, or do a random NPC for smuggling – skipping half an hour of a particularly dull mission. Better still is your ability to ignore The Council after every mission, keeping them completely in the dark for most of the game until the very last minute, annoying them immensely. *Mass Effect* leaves how to play it in your hands, and lets you live your fantasy of being the universe's biggest dick.



Shepard: Space Cowboy.

of the Council (a generic governmental body that gets in your way) must hunt down rogue Spectre agent Saren to stop him unleashing an ancient race of machines which will kill all intelligent life in the universe.

You're not alone in your quest as you pick up all kinds of helpers on your journey, from the homicidal yet intelligent Urdnot Wrex, to Garrus, a humanoid bird detective with a chip on his shoulder.

Shepard's crew are some of the most memorable of BioWare's creations, and

make for enjoyable conversation far beyond the main storyline. Yet it's the Unreal Engine 3's ability to portray realistic expressions and body language, and the excellent voice acting and motion capture work that adds a cinematic nuance to cutscenes and conversations, which makes you truly engage with the characters you play and meet.

Emotionally and narratively *Mass Effect* does things like a big-budget movie, rather than settling for *KOTOR*'s flat, empty-





Ghost ride the Normandy.



Vantage points are the key to victory.



“Characters live or die by your actions and fall in and out of love with you”

Doing a 360

We don't hate consoles. We're just better than them

While content-wise the 360 and PC versions of *Mass Effect* are virtually identical, the game plays a damn sight easier with a mouse and keyboard.

Dealing with menus isn't a chore with a mouse, especially considering the amount of buying, selling and navigation of the Galaxy Map you'll be doing.

Hotkeying abilities also makes using biotic and engineering abilities a lot less of a chore, though disappointingly you can only drag your own abilities onto them – it would have been amazing to have your teammate's moves available that easily, but alas, no such luck. There's also the new space bar key-bound squad command UI, which speeds up combat immensely, and makes the 360's version feel so amateurish that you'll never want to play it again.

Graphically, on low settings *Mass Effect* delivers the same quality as on the 360. On a tricked-out PC you'll be looking at a crisper, smoother adventure – and this game was stunning on our lesser-resolution cousins. *Mass Effect's* ability to run well and look good at lower settings seriously outdoes games like *Assassin's Creed* and *Crysis*.



Your average 360 owner.

faced conversations: Shepard raises an eyebrow quizzically, Joker – your pilot – grimaces in embarrassment, and chief evil-doer Saren angrily chews space furniture like no other.

Dialogue trees are handled slightly differently to *KOTOR* and *Jade Empire*. Rather than selecting an exact sentence you pick a response that has a particular tone. For example, telling Joker “You worry too much”, starts Shepard on a diatribe about him being too cautious. What's especially interesting is when you use charming or intimidating answers (highlighted in blue or red) they can end in an altercation, a threat or even flirting.

Beyond this, you're able to choose the generic paths of good (Paragon) and evil (Renegade), but there are areas where you're given choices that are definite shades of grey. For example, when you're

choosing between letting a murderous insect race live or die, characters voice persuasive opinions both for and against their genocide. These decisions are only made more agonising by the genuine emotions that BioWare have invested the characters with. Even ardent evil-doers may find themselves edging towards friendlier acts when their long-neglected conscience comes a-knockin'.

What's more, good works don't negate evil ones. In *KOTOR* good and evil were on a sliding scale, so doing nice things made up for your prior evil doings in a vaguely Church of England manner. People you encountered liked you – no matter how much of a dick you'd been a few hours previously. In *Mass Effect*, if you do evil, people will remember your reprehensible actions and act on them, even if it's the only blemish on a career path that makes a paladin look sleazy.

NO DIRECTION HOME

Your choices do have an effect on the storyline, though they're not as pronounced as in, say, *The Witcher*. Characters live and die by your actions, and fall in and out of love with you depending on how you treat them. If you're clever, you can even create an



Chin up, Wrex.



Shepard: crack shot and fantastic dancer.

uncomfortable love triangle which comes to a head in the briefing room like the critical scene of seminal classic *How To Be A Player*, with your two jealous paramours crossing their arms and pouting as you choose between them.

These moments of levity provide a welcome and much-needed contrast to the overwhelming shadow of impending doom that spreads over the whole game, encompassing a space operatic adventure that stretches over 20 hours on the first play. And that's if you're mainly sticking to the primary storyline.

Mass Effect's duration can be stretched further by exploring remote planets with the slightly irritating M35 Mako (see Mako Me Crazy) and taking the chance to search for strange and unusual stuff, from a small military base full of renegades to a gigantic angry Thresher Worm.

Occasionally, you'll also receive missions from the Alliance Navy, members of your team, or residents of the Citadel (the giant space station that's the centre of *Mass Effect's* civilisation) that lead to more complex quests that reward you with money and experience and – in one case – a brand-new class you didn't get offered at the game's start.

Some of these missions are genuinely brilliant stories – such as hunting down Dr Heart, an organ trader with a horrible secret, and watching in awe as the usually calm and friendly Garrus encourages you to shoot him in the head. Dramatic stuff.

MASS HYSTERIA

There's not a lot to dislike about *Mass Effect*, but there are certainly things that could've been better. The Mako is one of the least driveable vehicles in gaming history, bumbling around like a drunken St Bernard. The (mercifully few) times that you pilot it seem lacking compared to the rest of the game.

There are times when side missions feel repetitive, with many being nothing more than a brief skirmish, followed by a conversation that ends in either a friendly chat or a crispy corpse. They're not all that low grade – especially in the case of the free-to-download *Bring Down The Sky* pack, which adds 90 minutes or so to the game – but the non-story planets can lack polish and variety.

If you have the Xbox 360 version of *Mass Effect*, you're in a pickle. On the one hand, there's nothing truly new here. On the other hand, playing the game on a mouse and keyboard is like playing a



Bloody blind dates.



"Google Maps screwed us again."

brand-new game. Unlike its console predecessor, the PC version makes combat exciting and fun, depending less on auto aim and more on real skill.

After two playthroughs on the 360 and a third on the PC, I can honestly say that this is how the game was meant to be played, and the experience is incredibly refreshing. If you've never played the game before, then this is an unequivocal must-buy. If you have, and the money's knocking about – then you still might be interested in playing the definitive *Mass Effect*.

This is simply one of the best action RPGs to come out in years: beautiful, dramatic and epic, with memorable characters, replayability in bounds and delivering fantastic in-game storytelling. Considering you can complete the game a second time to try and get different endings, achievements and sexual partners, there's at least two plays here for both action and RPG fans alike.

If you are a fan of what BioWare's done in the past, like action with a hefty dose of sci-fi and want something new, or just like playing a really good game, then you owe it to yourself to pick up this fantastic title. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics Luscious, cinematic
Sound Loud, proud, orchestral
Multiplayer None

- ✓ Looks amazing
- ✓ Characters display emotion
- ✓ Genuinely dramatic
- ✓ Action elements are fun
- ✓ RPG elements and conversations engaging
- ✗ Mako a bit naff

92

Massively effective



PENNY ARCADE ADVENTURES

Jon Blyth swears loudly at animated Victorians

DEVELOPER Hothead Games
PUBLISHER Greenhouse/
Penny Arcade
WEBSITE penny-arcade.com
ETA Out now
PRICE \$20 (£10)



AT A GLANCE...

Roam the hobo streets and amusement parks, looking for closely interwoven clues, cases and combat.

Minimum system requirements:
1GHz processor, 512MB RAM, and a 256MB graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

FINAL FANTASY VII 93%

SAM & MAX 2.05 84%

PENNY ARCADE ADVENTURES 83%

DON'T BE PUT off if you've never read the *Penny Arcade* cartoon strip at penny-arcade.com. Cartoon strips are good like that, they have to make themselves accessible to a new crowd, every day. You might not be aware of the mechanical gentleman known colloquially as the Fruit Fucker, but if that's the case, you'll just have to enjoy throwing oranges at a tiny leg-humping robot on a different level. Might I suggest erotic whimsy?

Penny Arcade Adventures: On The Rain-Slick Precipice Of Darkness is most similar to *Final Fantasy*, although that conjures a world of complexity and seriousness that is completely absent in this title.

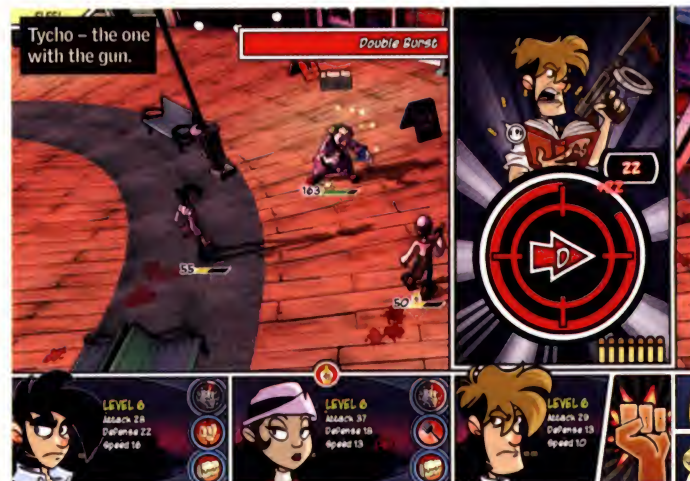
PAA is, first and foremost, fun and funny. There are no random encounters. Cutscenes and dialogue are, as you'd expect, in a 2D comic-book style, and the area exploration and combat is dealt with in the gorgeous cel-shaded artwork you can see littered about the page.

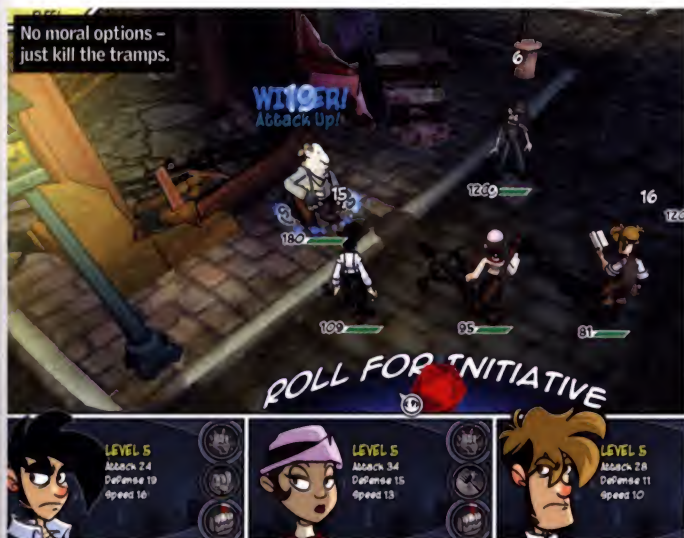
Gabe and Tycho aren't voiced, sensibly, so only the excellent narrator speaks. This also gives you the precious ability to get through the game at your

own reading pace, without feeling like you're missing a bit of acting.

YOU GET 25 GIL

Walk into an enemy, and battle starts. After the classic roll for initiative, it's a elegantly simple and well-executed take on traditional RPG turn-based combat. Over time, three buttons fill up. The first allows you to use an item, which are found in plentiful crates and bins around the levels. At the beginning, these are essential.





"The dialogue is effortlessly hilarious and seriously crass. This game is the crudest in recent memory"

With the second circle full, you can use a basic attack, and as your characters level up, you'll start to wait for the final circle to fill. This allows you to use any of your character's three unlockable special moves. A minigame determines how much damage you cause and whether you get the bonus status effect. You can also do team attacks, but these are poorly thought-out and rarely give the payoff you feel you deserve.

PAA is a streamlined game – you're only ever one click away from your home, so running around is kept to a minimum. The only penalty for death is an insult and having to fight the battle again. There's no distinction, as far as healing is concerned, between damage and incapacitation. This keeps the inventory simple – just bandage a knocked-out partner, and they're back in the fray.



Most anti-RPG of all, there's no monster respawn. The XP available to you is finite – which means you're levelling up when Hothead wants you to, not because you're dumb enough to spend six hours killing the same bee. All this makes the episode feel safe, self-contained, and removes the dread of infinity that characterises most RPGs. Apart from the fairground games (you need five wins on each to unlock everything), nothing wastes your time.

VILE CURSES

For such an excellent cartoon strip, the obligation to be funny must be crushing. But it's not a problem – the dialogue is effortlessly hilarious and crass. Seriously crass. If jokes about piss and swear words make you flinch because you think adults have no place divining mirth in such indelicate matters, then I have but two nuggets of counsel. Of primary concern, refrain at all costs from the fiscal acquisition of this product. Second, lighten up, you stuffy prick.

Swearing in games is usually – let's be honest – a complete shitbomb. Far from making everyone look "grewed-up" and exciting, it spatters us with its ugly teenage taint. This game is the crudest in

A new delivery

If a red house is made with red bricks, what's a Greenhouse made of?



Despite the implication of the first paragraph, *Penny Arcade* is instantly accessible to people who've never even heard of the internet, let alone bought a Mega 64 DVD from *Penny Arcade*'s online store. That said, you will need to learn about the internet quickly, because PAA is being made available over their own digital delivery service, Greenhouse (playgreenhouse.com).

They've been testing it with downloads of a deliberately oversized podcast, so hopefully nothing'll louse up on the release date. If their stated commitment to independent games development is to be believed, Greenhouse will hopefully be another way for quality small titles to get publicised, paid for and played.



recent memory, but unlike *Kane & Lynch*, Gabe and Tycho swear effectively by swearing intelligently. The expletives come a little too regularly to keep their comic sting, but like Keats himself famously failed to say – a stream of elegant filth is a joy forever. When a park guard suggests you can't enter using a Family Ticket because you're not a real family, the retort "we're as related as fuck" feels like something I'd want to say.

The game won't break you, the puzzles are basic, and the combat is only occasionally tough, but there's a constant conveyor-belt dropping a blend of new powers, plot progress and laughter into your cheerful lap. What they'll do to continue the progress without pressing a big reset button is a mystery to me – let's deal with that once we've got to it. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics Small, but lovely
Sound Saturday morning
cinema serials
Multiplayer No, sorry

- ✓ Excellent humour
- ✓ Justified swearing
- ✓ Fast-track RPG progression
- ✓ Instantly fun combat
- ✗ Occasionally repetitive

83

Case closed



EUROPA UNIVERSALIS: ROME

Richie Shoemaker revises his Latin and sends the maid home early

DEVELOPER Paradox Interactive
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive
WEBSITE paradoxplaza.com/rome
ETA Out now
PRICE £29.99



AT A GLANCE...

EU is *Total War*, but more for those wanting a higher degree of overall command rather than battlefield fun.

Minimum system requirements:
1.9GHz processor, 512MB RAM and a 128MB graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

ROME: TOTAL WAR 93%

EU: ROME 79%

CAESAR IV 73%

IF ALL PCS were encased in smooth veneer of walnut and mahogany and keyboards clicked to the sound of manicured fingers on buffed ivory, *Europa Universalis* would probably be the most popular game in the world.

This is the sort of game which should give wives cause to withdraw to the drawing room to allow their husbands to ponder their next move with a glass of Henri IV Dudognon Heritage while drawing on Scotch Cake curling from a pipe almost as expensive as the PC.

I'm not saying the long-running *Europa Universalis* series is more refined than any other game, or that it's self-important, only that it has a certain clarity and pace that seems far removed from the here and now.

Having taken the series through various historical waypoints (World War

II in *Hearts of Iron* and the apex of British Imperial power in *Victoria*), *Rome* marks the fourth historical divergence for the series, and if you've played previous games (the 3D *Europa Universalis III* especially), you will know what to expect. If you haven't, *EU: Rome* is a bit like *Risk* – in the same way that new *Battlestar Galactica* is a bit like the old one. They're related, but one has the depth of a coal mine, the other of your local Lido pool.

THINKING TIME

To do all the things required of you (raising armies and moving them about) takes a fair amount of time, and to ponder a grand strategy to accomplish your aims requires much more. Against you are other nations and alliances, as well as barbarian hordes and the treachery of generals who might get too big for their sandals, not to mention the wants and needs of your slaves and citizens. And don't forget the gods – they hate it when you do anything.

EU: Rome is focused on a smaller than before area and elements such as diplomacy and economy have been streamlined. Meanwhile, the characters and bloodlines within your borders have

a lot more going on, so *EU: Rome* offers a subtle shift of emphasis from its forebears. Too subtle to convince the Stella-drinking, Benny Hedgehog-smoking masses that it's anything but a game for posh brainy wankers, perhaps. But if the *Europa Universalis* series is your thing, *Rome* is a welcome evolution. And if this historical period itself holds appeal for you, it's essential. **PZ**



PCZONE

Graphics Great map, otherwise functional
Sound Unimposing
Multiplayer Cliques, but works well

- ✓ Unparalleled political intrigue
- ✓ Highly replayable
- ✓ Lots to think about
- ✗ Battles lack interest

79

Absolutum Dominium

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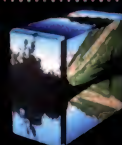
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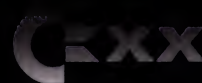
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A Robin Reliant would probably look cool if viewed from a jaunty angle.



RACE DRIVER: GRID

Steve Hill has cars in his eyes, buffs his helmet, etc, etc...

DEVELOPER Codemasters
PUBLISHER Codemasters
WEBSITE racedrivergrid.com
ETA June
PRICE £34.99



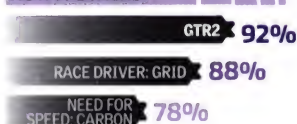
AT A GLANCE...

Codemasters' trusty driving series returns with a comprehensive tour of the racing scenes of America, Europe and Japan. And no cutscenes.

Minimum system requirements:

2.66GHz Core 2 processor, 2GB RAM, and a 256MB graphics card. Vista requires Service Pack 1.

HOW IT STACKS



HELLO, STEPHEN. YOUR car is ready and waiting." What? Hello? Me? The latest instalment in Codemasters' *Race Driver* series may not have become self-aware (yet) but there has been a change in emphasis. Long-time fans may recall the often risible narrative that accompanied the earlier games, with the story relayed in ham-infested cutscenes, which history now judges as somewhere between mildly tolerable and a bit wank. Memorably, there was one game in which your character was perennially harangued by a drunken Scotsman when all you really wanted to do was race a car.

Not any more. You are you and if you can't find your name amidst the myriad of audio files – or if you fancy a more informal approach – you can opt to be known as one of several nicknames, be it Ace, Boss, Chief, Captain, Spanky or Stud. In line with modern trends, it's part of *GRID*'s attempt at personalisation, so your chosen moniker is used throughout the game, whether you're being barked at by your pit crew, or aurally caressed by your sassy manageress.

Why do you need a manageress? Because you're not just racing for the thrill of it, you're competing to earn cold hard cash, which you can then spend on more cars to earn more cash, get sponsors, and so on and so forth. However, in typical rags-to-riches fashion, you begin the game with

scarcely a pot to piss in, forced to eke out a living driving for other teams on a freelance basis.

In trademark *Race Driver* style, you're immediately thrown in at the deep end, stuck behind the wheel of a Dodge Viper on the streets of San Francisco. This is certainly a baptism of fire, and the chances are you'll make an absolute pig's ear of it, grossly misjudging the power of the car and careering haplessly into the crash barrier. But this doesn't matter. Using the physics-defying Flashback feature, you can reverse time to the point prior to you losing control and pretend that it never happened. In the event, it makes no difference where you finish, as simply competing in the first race earns you a rookie license.

TRAVEL SICK

This license gives you options, namely the chance to drive for various racing teams in the USA, Europe or Japan. One event in each territory becomes available, with a fee awarded for competing in it, as well as a range of bonuses for finishing above a certain position. As explained by your enigmatic off-screen manageress, the goal is to earn 40 grand, at which point you can set up your own team and have a proper stab at global domination.

In game terms, it's a minor taster of what's to come, with each territory featuring five locations, all playing host

to bespoke events. So in the US of A, there's an emphasis on muscle cars and tight city-based street racing, with a range of tracks situated in the likes of San Francisco, Washington and Detroit. As for Europe, it's more traditional *TOCA* fare that sees you tackle some classic circuits such as Donington, Nurburgring and Spa (Francorchamps in Belgium, not Leamington).

Japan is a different bag altogether, featuring no less than three different types of drift event, which, as *Need For Speed* fans will attest, involve sliding your car round in an irresponsible fashion in order to accrue points.

Japan is also host to the Touge (pronounced "too gay") races, one-versus-one affairs that see you race over two legs up and down a windy hill track, with the aggregate time proving decisive and penalties added for contact. By way





The obligatory first corner snarl up.



Tokyo's Shibuya district in all its neon glory.



"Make a pig's ear of it and you can rewind time to where you lost control"

A new day has come. And there are lots of races to be won.



of variation, the Midnight Touge is an illegal event where anything goes and other traffic is on the road.

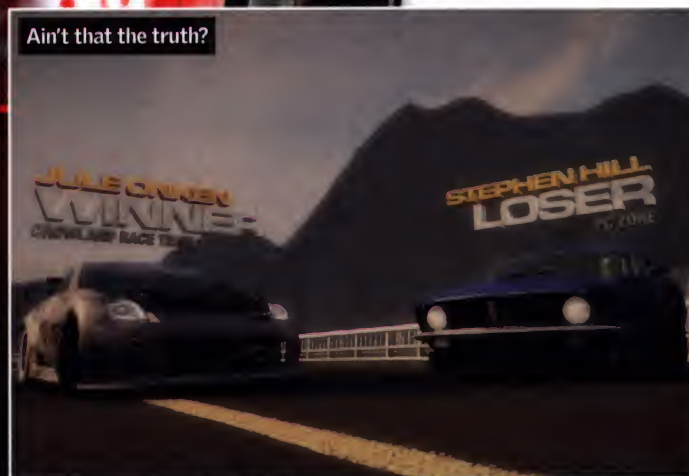
As well as cash, competing in events earns you reputation points in those territories, as well as a global rep.

Depending on your skills and event selection, reaching the magical 40k figure should only take a handful of races, at which point you're rewarded with a recently renovated... Ford Mustang.

Despite the Mustang's status as a classic American street car and a popular choice on race tracks and drag strips, after driving Lamborghinis and Porsches it seems a bit of a slap in the face. Still, there is some method in the meanness. Freelancing for other teams in their fancy European cars earns you a bit of corn, but driving for your own team boosts your reputation hugely. And what

"On-track action is not for the faint-hearted – the crashes are undeniably spectacular"

Ain't that the truth?





You'll believe a car can fly.



Better than Herbie.

does reputation make? Licenses, with three in each territory culminating in the ultimate international license.

GET THE DRIFT

Once you've named your team and given your Mustang a paint, 18 race events become available, six in each region. While the Mustang is good for muscle car events, you need to dip into your earnings and buy cars commensurate with the respective events, be it Pro Tuned, Pro Muscle, Touring Cars, Open Wheel or even Demolition Derby.

The prices are on a vaguely sliding scale, so you will have to put the effort in, but as you can never lose money it really is only a matter of time before you can afford the top-end wheels, either

box-fresh or through an eBay Motors system, that seems to have been shoe-horned in for advertising reasons. And crucially, there's no tweaking under the bonnet: what you see is what you get, with no need to ever tamper with your camshaft ratio.

As for the Race Events, they start as bite-sized affairs, with a championship often consisting of a pair of three-lap races, which doesn't give you much leeway if you cock up the first one.

If you've got enough cash, you can pick and choose events at will, although you will find yourself specialising in one region. In our experience, the traditional thrill of the European circuits was favoured over the tight American street racing, which in turned trumped the more obscure Japanese events. Does anyone really enjoy drift racing?

Due to the fairly open structure, there's nothing to stop you simply concentrating on one region and claiming all your licenses there. However, to reach international accolade, you'll eventually have to tackle the other races elsewhere

in the world, a task that can sometimes feel like schoolwork.

DAMAGE LIMITATION

As for the on-track action, it features the cut and thrust associated with the series. No place for the faint-hearted, it's a highly physical affair – slamming into your opponents may be unsporting but it's effective. And besides, they're just as likely to smash into you, with some particularly aggressive AI on display.

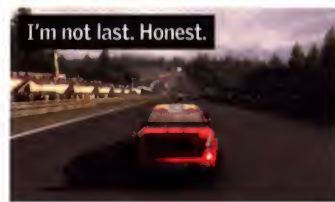
Collisions aren't without forfeits however, as the extensive damage model is more than superficial, affecting handling and performance. Recent years have seen something of a damage truce in racing games, but it's back with a vengeance in *GRID*, with broken cars

listing violently to one side, which according to your temperament is either pleasingly realistic or a pain in the arse. The key obviously is not to damage your car, and it can be more satisfying to avoid the first corner carnage and pick off the field one by one, although the brevity of the career races can often scupper this tactic. Incidentally, away from the career, customisable races are available with between one and 50 laps.

Knacking your car may be a drawback competitively, but it's undeniably a spectacular feature, making a mockery of other damage-free games, despite *GRID*'s licensed cars. Going for a Hollywood approach, crashes are spectacular: cars crumple, doors flap open, bumpers come



Run away!



I'm not last. Honest.

Can I get a rewind? If I could turn back time...



Doing it Nippon style

Here I am driving my shiny car round a fictional track set in Japan's Yokohama docks. I am a man in control of my vehicle.



Am I insured?

Some ungracious scrote has damaged my rear end and I appear to be careering headlong into that building.



Re-rewind like Bo' Selecta

Not to worry. With the help of the instant replay button I can rewind to the point before it all went tits up.



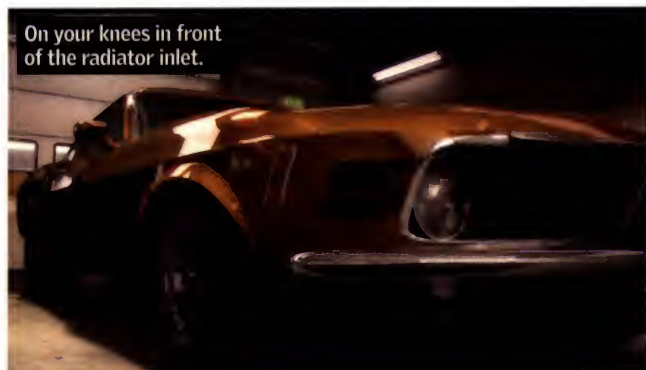
And play like a... Walkman?

I might lose my no-claims bonus but by pressing the magic Flashback button I can continue as if nothing happened.

Garage Land

Car showroom...

On your knees in front of the radiator inlet.



The cutscenes and backstory have been done away in *GRID*, effectively putting you at the heart of the game. And while in reality it is little more than a glorified 3D menu screen, your downtime is spent in your garage, accompanied by the dulcet tones of your manageress and your selection of shiny motor vehicles.

Should you be so inclined, you can study them in detail, circumnavigating them lovingly as the light glints seductively off the paintwork, tempting you to touch. Or you could just whip out the bucket and sponge and give them a good old wash.

"A near-perfect blend of aggression, skill and seat-of-the-pants driving for the most inclusive racing game around"

off, and the track can become strewn with debris from vehicles and the immediate environment. So spectacular is the damage model that the Demolition Derby mode seems to have been created to show it off, providing a slice of automotive destruction that could easily be done off as a standalone game. As indeed could the Le Mans event.

GRID LOCK

The fact that such well-realised events are part of a greater whole is to *GRID*'s credit, making it the most inclusive racing game around. Essentially though, it's about the race experience, a near-perfect blend of skill, aggression and seat-of-the-

pants driving. Having a pack of growling touring cars snapping at your rear bumper as you precariously negotiate a Donington bend is on some levels as scary as fleeing from a horde of zombies in a dogshit survival game.

Codemasters' racing studio know what they're doing and have again got the key elements right. The damage model is one of the best in the business, as is the excellent AI. Instead of sticking to the racing line like shit to a blanket, the computer-controlled drivers show human-like qualities, weaving all over the track, having a dig at you and wiping out spectacularly in front of you, leaving vehicle parts all over the track. And should you wish to race actual humans,



Searching desperately for Autoglass.



The in-car view looks great for the two seconds you're in control.

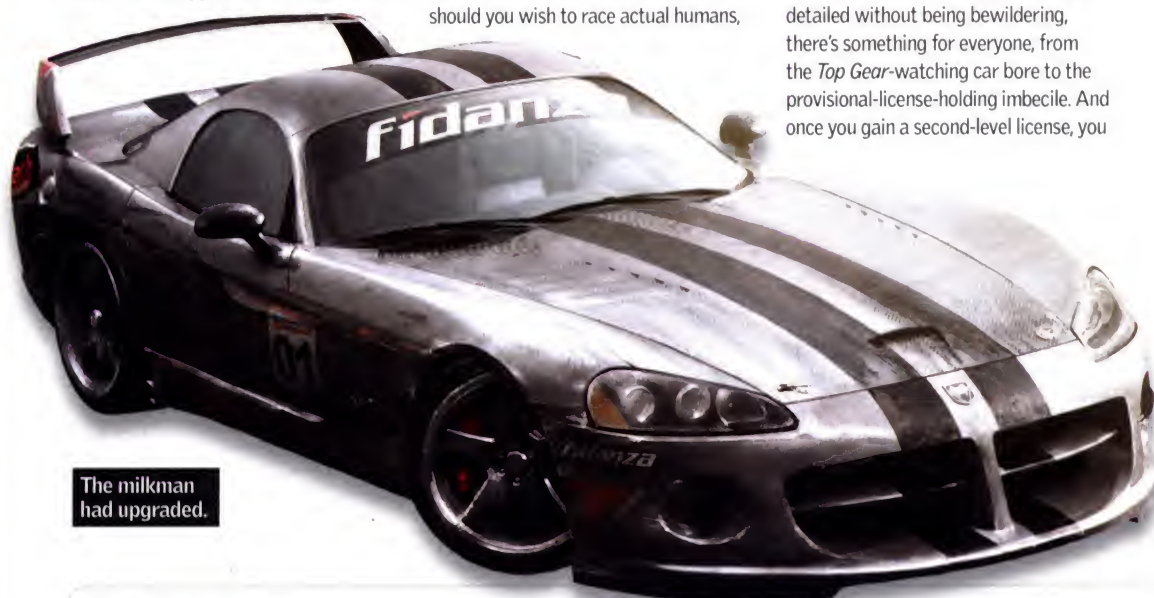
every track and car is available from the start, either online or over a LAN.

Dullards may quibble about such concepts as simulation, but ultimately *GRID* is as hardcore as you want it to be. Driving aids such as traction control are optional, the in-car camera is all but unusable to mere mortals and Pro Mode prevents you from using Flashbacks or from restarting races. As with the rest of the game, it's all about choices.

And given the choice between *GRID* and any of the other racing games available, you can't go far wrong. Accessible without being patronising, detailed without being bewildering, there's something for everyone, from the *Top Gear*-watching car bore to the provisional-license-holding imbecile. And once you gain a second-level license, you

can even hire a teammate, making for some tactical races and a concerted assault on the team championship.

If you can point a lump of metal down a track, then there is a wealth of entertainment to be found here. While the open structure is a double-edged sword in that it enables you to race the events you like while the ones you dislike inexorably mount up, you're never short of something to do. Apparently, there's something called *Gran Turismo* coming out on the PS3. We simply won't be there. You'll find us on the *GRID*. **PCZ**



The milkman had upgraded.

PCZONE

Graphics Mainly superb
Sound Realistic engine noise
Multiplayer Yes

- ✓ Good driving model
- ✓ Superb damage
- ✓ Realistic AI
- ✗ No weather effects

88

The car's the star

PLAYSTATION 3 MAG PSW

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UEFA EURO 2008

Steve Hill reports from the safety of his armchair...

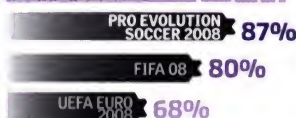
DEVELOPER EA Canada
PUBLISHER EA
WEBSITE easports.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £29.99

AT A GLANCE...

Last-gen *FIFA* with a token Euro 2008 skin. One for the obsessives or the ones who don't care what season they play that much.

Minimum system requirements:
1.3GHz processor, 256MB RAM and a 64MB graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS



ENGLAND'S ABJECT FAILURE to qualify for Euro 2008 may have spared the citizens of Austria and Switzerland the sight of ruddy men in polyester shirts singing about the IRA, but unsurprisingly gamers haven't been spared the inevitable release of another EA Sports event product.

Presumably the hope is that if you're a fan of any of the home nations, righting perceived wrongs using the medium of PC games will numb the pain of a tournament rendered meaningless by your team's non-participation.

Of course it won't – and as a further kick in the teeth, while Xbox 360 and PS3 owners are treated to a shiny new game with fancy controls and a huge suite of online options, the HD internet-ready PC again gets a murky port of the PS2 game. With *FIFA* on the next-gen

consoles almost challenging the mighty *Pro Evolution Soccer*, the PC is left with little more than a few tweaks to an ancient game engine, albeit one that can occasionally throw up a half decent game of association football.

SAFE EUROPEAN HOME

While the creaking *FIFA* engine features too many foibles to maintain your interest over an entire season, as the basis of a bite-sized tournament it just about cuts the mustard. And while you can simply play out the finals, you can also relive the misery of the qualifying campaign, albeit with the fixtures in the wrong order.

As for attempts at innovation, the Captain Your Country mode is an extension of *FIFA 08*'s Be A Pro whereby you control a single player on the pitch. As then, it's an acquired taste, bordering on the uninviting, particularly if you get sent off after half an hour. There's also a challenge-based European campaign where points make stickers.

There's also a new golf swing-style method for taking set pieces, but ultimately if you've played any of the recent *FIFA* games you've pretty much played this, with its spongy handling,

superhuman goalkeepers and tendency to degenerate into schoolyard football.

How long the PC keeps getting served 'old *FIFA*' depends on the longevity of the PS2 market, but for now next-gen console owners are performing tricks in their new boots while we're looking over the fence in last season's kit. **PCZ**



PCZONE

Graphics Average
Sound Superb commentary
Multiplayer Online is flaky

- ✓ Instantly playable
- ✓ Highly authentic
- ✗ Fixture irregularities
- ✗ Not PES
- ✗ Too similar to *FIFA 08*
- ✗ Nowhere near as good as the PS3 version

68

Kicking it old school



TRIALS 2: SECOND EDITION

Will Porter wants your clothes, your boots and your motorcycle

DEVELOPER RedLynx
PUBLISHER RedLynx
WEBSITE redlynxtrials.com
ETA Out now
PRICE \$1990 (£10)

AFUNDAMENTALLY important part of the early '80s was a TV show called *Junior Kick Start* – a primetime motorcycle trials competition that encouraged viewers to actively hope beyond hope that children riding on heavy pieces of machinery would fall from a slippery log headfirst into a muddy ditch. It was like a delayed gratification version of *You've Been Framed*, and had a brilliant theme tune.

Trials 2: Second Edition is *Junior Kick Start* the game, but what with this being the modern day the poor rider is invariably crushed, broken, burnt and dropped down chimneys Blofeld-style rather than coming a cropper while driving over some hay bales and a clapped out VW Beetle. It shares a very similar world-view to *TrackMania* with taxing, acrobatic courses, stopwatch-baiting gameplay and a one-more-go mentality that rarely lets you go.

The tracks themselves are often wonderful: flaming, looping pieces of joy that get ever-more challenging – and on the few dynamic levels, the physics is generously extended to the environment, providing even more ways to cripple your modern-day Eddie Kidd with tumbling barrels and see-sawing planks. What's more, the nature of the beast means that

extra levels and crazy YouTube videos of people far, far better than you completing courses are unavoidable.

Control comes through the always helpful cursor keys; up and down provide acceleration and brake duties, while left and right have your doomed biker lean back and forth. 2D acrobatics in a faux three-dimensional world is the order of the day, and it's honestly harder than you think. Your poor ragdoll motorcyclist doesn't automatically reset his centre of gravity, and more often than not you'll find yourself desperately swivelling head over heels with a looming increment to the ghoulish 'bones broken' tally at the top of the screen.

As is the fashion, meanwhile, *Trials 2* automatically logs you on to a worldwide rankings system – not quite matching the likes of *TrackMania* and *Audiosurf* but still successful enough to let you know that you're a desultory 2,000th best in the world at a certain track.



Achievements can be nabbed, groups formed and nations compared in their two-wheeled abilities (UK currently leading by a country mile).

Trials 2 shouldn't cost twice the price of *Audiosurf*, and it would fare better on Steam come to that, but this is an update on an ancient arcade sensibility that should not go ignored. Gentlemen, start your engines. **PCT**

AT A GLANCE...

Evolution of a popular webgame that rivals *TrackMania* in its simple "Try again!" loveliness and clever nest of interweb niceties.

Minimum system requirements:
1.5Ghz processor, 256MB RAM and a 128MB graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

TRACKMANIA NATIONS 86%
TRIALS 2 80%
LINE RIDER N/A

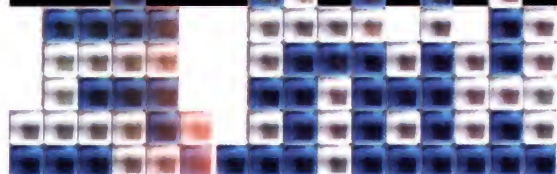
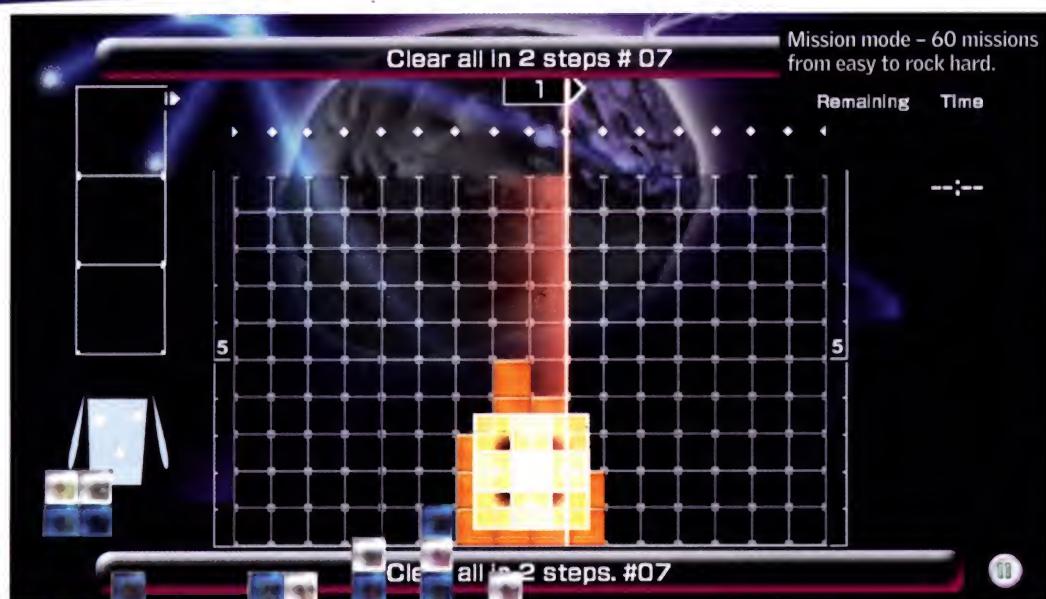
PCZONE

Graphics Lovely, cool camera angles
Sound Does the job
Multiplayer Totally Web 2.0. Really, it's everywhere...

- ✓ Dangerously addictive
- ✓ Hard, but not frustrating
- ✓ Excellent ranking system
- ✓ Counts broken bones
- ✗ A smidge overpriced?

80

Trick nuts



LUMINES

Jon Blyth went in two by two. Hurrah! Hurrah!

DEVELOPER Q Entertainment
PUBLISHER Steam
WEBSITE snipurl.com/steamlumines
ETA Out now
PRICE \$10 (£5), \$15 (£7.50) with Advance Pack

AT A GLANCE...

The puzzler that gave PSP owners something to play in 2005 makes it onto the PC – just don't try to play it with your mouse.

Minimum system requirements:
 If you can play any other game, you can play Lumines.

HOW IT STACKS

PUZZLE QUEST 86%

AUDIOSURF 78%

LUMINES 73%

WHEN YOU FIRST play *Lumines*, you wonder what the fuss is about. To the blinkered mind, it's the game that everyone played on PSP because *GTA: Vice City Stories* hadn't come out yet. A couple of brief plays back in '05 confirmed my suspicions that it was a baffling let-down from the mind that had brought the world the wonders of *Space Channel 5* and *Rez*.

I was missing two things: time and earphones. For a game where the only point is to drop two-coloured blocks in such a way as to create two-by-two blocks of the same colour, it works in such a gently counterintuitive way that you'll wonder what you're doing wrong. But when the little tricks of how to drop the blocks occur to you (or, you can just play through the challenge and tutorial levels) the simple pleasure of matching up little squares develops its appeal.

CLEANING UP

Your blocks don't disappear instantly. They're removed by a janitorial bar that combs the play area every four seconds. This is something you have to keep in mind while you're rotating your square: everything removed in one sweep counts

towards a combo, and different combos are rewarded with different sounds.

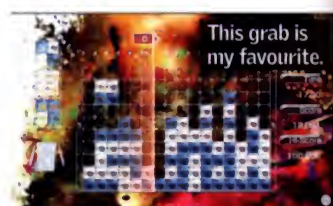
This is where you can feel the hand of Tetsuya Mizuguchi – music has always been integral to his big games and it's woven seamlessly into the gameplay in *Lumines*. Just like *Rez*, everything you do makes a sound as harmonious to the ear as it is hypnotically repetitive.

BLOCKY IV

But whilst *Rez* has stunning visuals to bring you into the game, *Lumines* does a damn good job of alienating you. Every level changes the music, block design and background video – from high-contrast ambience to barely-distinguishable blocks with acid house visuals.

On these levels, the challenge is simply surviving the eye strain. If Q Entertainment wanted to induce nausea, they could have just popped in a sly goatse behind the block-dropping action. Just spare me from the visuals of a bad '90s dance club.

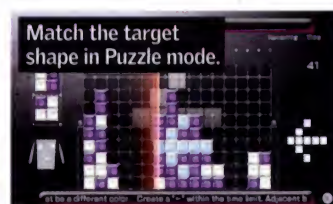
Lumines is a great puzzle game. For every block-dropping match-and-remove game that works, there must be a hundred that don't and *Lumines* has the distinction of making you think in a satisfying new way. Puzzle and challenge



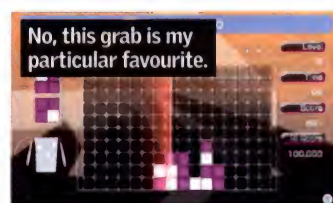
This grab is my favourite.



What looks prettiest isn't always best.



Match the target shape in Puzzle mode.



No, this grab is my particular favourite.

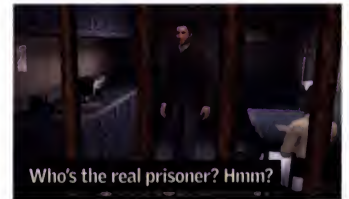
PCZONE

Graphics Pulchritudinous, then emetic
 Sound Interwoven beautifully with gameplay
 Multiplayer No sir

- ✓ Music and effects work together
- ✓ Simple but challenging
- ✓ Effective time Hoover
- ✗ Advance pack isn't worth it
- ✗ Visuals can be obnoxious

73

What's puzzle fusion?



OVERCLOCKED: A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Jon Blyth finds out there was violence before videogames

DEVELOPER House Of Tales
PUBLISHER Lighthouse
WEBSITE overclocked-game.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £19.99

OVERCLOCKED! YEAH! RIP off your safety switch – this is gonna be crazy, like an upturned hat filled with jumping murder beans. Rip out your teeth, Grandma – this is gonna get mucky.

In fact, *Overclocked* is as low-octane as point-and-clicks get, turning the engine off and freewheeling downhill towards Lake Atmospherically Placid. This is not an inherently bad thing, and if you can stomach the game's faults, of which there are two generous handfuls, then *Overclocked* has some charming, if stilted, storytelling on offer.

The storyline is the game's strongest point. The opening cinematic explains that people are going gun-crazy insane and your work as an innovative psychiatrist allows you to live through their flashbacks. As you hear their stories, you begin to realise they're all intertwined. The combination of mysterious circumstance, crossed fates and slow revelation puts you in mind of the movies *Cube* and *Memento*, and the games *Silent Hill* and *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream*.

This game feels like it should be excellent – and it would be, if the

developers had any sense of timing, the puzzles felt anything but routine, and the actors weren't as charismatic as a speech synthesis program.

MEGATHRILLS

The main problem with controlling the protagonist psychiatrist is the foggy triggering of events. To get into the flashbacks of the patients, you have to do something that resonates with them. This can involve recreating the darkness of their memory, playing them a recording of another patient's recollections, or, least satisfying of all, playing them what they just said to you.

Even by the seventh or eighth flashback, I wasn't sure exactly how it was working, and the bite-sized nature of the flashbacks makes them unable to accommodate anything more complicated than a single puzzle. The contrast between the unfocussed, easily forgotten aims of the main game and the padded-cell item-combination of the flashbacks is so sharp that it ends up making both look slightly embarrassed.

That *Overclocked* isn't better is sad, because there's a good story being told. Despite the acting and translation, some

of the characters are well-written enough to shine through the stilted dialogue. This is a flawed game, as I'm sure you've gathered from my predominantly negative tone. But to a forgiving soul, and a point-and-click fan, it definitely has the capacity to serve up some atmospheric entertainment. **PC7**

AT A GLANCE...

You play a psychiatrist whose methods of therapy are somewhat more interactive than usual, and involve more combination locks.

Minimum system requirements: 1.3GHz processor, 512MB RAM (1GB for Vista), and a 256MB graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

JACK KEANE 73%

OVERCLOCKED 56%

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED 50%

PCZONE

Graphics Pixelly dead faces
 Sound Atmospheric, but has stilted timing
 Multiplayer No way

- ✓ Great storyline
- ✓ Good script
- ✗ Shame about the delivery
- ✗ Puzzles feel done-before
- ✗ Internal logic failures

56
 Underwhelmed



SAM AND MAX 2.05: WHAT'S NEW, BEELZEBUB?

The second season's conclusion leaves *Jon Blyth* satisfied

DEVELOPER Telltale Games
PUBLISHER Telltale/Gametap
WEBSITE www.telltalegames.com/samandmax
ETA Out now
PRICE \$9 (£5) for one episode, \$35 (£18) for the season



AT A GLANCE...

You know the score – it's a comedy point-and-click. Think of it as a TV show where you sometimes get stuck.

Minimum system requirements:
 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM and a 32Mb graphics card.

HOW IT STACKS

SAM & MAX 2.05 84%
SAM & MAX 2.03 75%
OTHER COMMERCIAL POINT-AND-CLICKS 68%

THE END OF season 2 is here. A season that's seen time-travelling highs and camp vampire lows.

Whereas the first season saw the finale on the moon, this time we're off to Hell, where a soft-spoken and rather businesslike Satan is heading up the newly efficient soul-processing and personal hell section of the afterlife.

They're all here, from every episode – the Shambling Corporate Presence from *Ice Station Santa*; Hugh Bliss has an important job censoring the swear words of the world; even Brady Culture, from the very first episode of the first season, gets a talking role.

That's Telltale's economy – no character is throwaway and even the gates of Hell are startlingly close to the familiar backdrop of Straight Street. By



the end of the season 2 the world of *Sam & Max* seems full and achingly likeable, and the trawl through the dead cast's personal hells is a great way to let you know more about them. If nothing else, there're enough revelations in 2.05 to qualify *Sam & Max* as a soap opera.

YET MORE CAKE

Some of it works and some of it leaves you with a gentle taste of WTF. For instance, the finale is a great dramatic reveal that proves that Telltale listen to criticism and have the sense to turn it to their advantage. However, while fantasy fans may be comfortable with Ursula Le Guin's idea that learning something's true name gives you power over it, when this leads to the revelation that you've been talking to a... well, to a foodstuff... for four months, it might be a little too wacky to some palates. Some might consider that a spoiler, but it comes so far from leftfield I can honestly say I haven't spoiled a thing. Honest.

Finally, there's the standard disclaimer, which I'm thinking of getting made into a rubber stamp for these reviews. Don't come to *Episode 2.05* expecting to join in and understand what's going on. The rest of us have

spent 18 months getting to this stage, and so many diverse elements converge to make this a satisfying conclusion that you'll be robbing yourself of 75 per cent of the fun if you start here. Occasionally weak puzzles and infrequent dud jokes aside, if you mark a game on how joyfully sad you feel at the end, season 2 of *Sam & Max* is second only to *Portal*. **PCZ**

PCZONE

Graphics What you're used to
 Sound Jazz and Mimesweeper
 Multiplayer I say no, no, no

- ✓ As funny as ever
- ✓ Personal hells
- ✓ Excellent finale
- ✓ Will annoy crazy Christians
- ✗ Odd duff puzzle

84

Finale Deluxe



THE GOLDEN HORDE

A game without the Midas touch

DEVELOPER World Forge
PUBLISHER JoWood
WEBSITE www.jowood.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £19.99

Minimum system requirements:

512MB RAM, 2.4GHz processor and a 128MB video card.

HISTORY IS BRILLIANT. With all the daily drudge decanted off, it's a load of battles, romances, Shakespeare plays and posh blokes murdering each other. *The Golden Horde* developers World Forge have taken these incredible stories and paid the scantest of lip service to them. They've taken three historic groups – the Crusaders, Russians and the Mongolian Horde – and thrown them into a struggle that feels like you're wiping your arse on a copy of *Age of Empires II*.

The problem with *The Golden Horde* is that it's got everything you could possibly expect from a middling RTS, but is hindered by wonky concepts. You send troops into battle, but the AI has them bumping into each other on the way, meaning your heroes sometimes don't make it into the fray until half of your men have been slaughtered.

Making matters worse is the need to equip villagers with weapons to create



soldiers – and each weapon needs to be made individually, so it's a slog of tapping your foot and humming impatiently until you can experience the frankly underwhelming combat.

There's a lot of waiting for absolutely no reason, to the point that you almost wish World Forge had just copied the rest of the genre and made the process much quicker.

In the end, the middling graphics, the hilariously bad voice acting and AI that's erratic enough to sever any immersion you might be feeling, all combine to make *The Golden Horde* patently unrecommendable.

Ed Zitron



FATE OF HELLAS

I hate those fellas

DEVELOPER World Forge
PUBLISHER JoWood
WEBSITE www.jowood.com
ETA Out now
PRICE £19.99

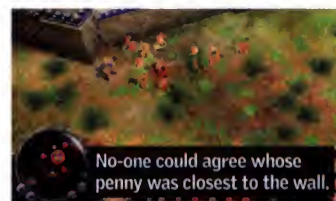
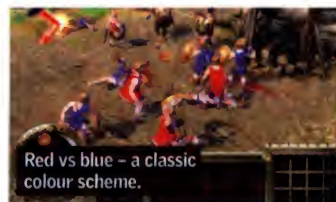
Minimum system requirements:

512MB RAM, 2.4GHz processor and a 128MB video card.

INSTEAD OF REVIEWING this game, which is substantially identical to the game on the opposite half of the page, let me just say how my opinions differ from those of my young colleague.

Having burned away the psychological oil that fuelled the passionate energy of my 20s, I relished the sedate routine of sending my workers back and forth, collecting up the dropped equipment of recent battles to equip new soldiers. I liked the fact my soldiers starved without food – it reminded me that I, too, require my hourly vitamin soup. The fact you can't automate this process keeps my arthritic clicking fingers exercised and nimble, and is a welcome distraction from the eventlessness of my life.

As for AI, who doesn't have a funny moment now and then? Last week I forgot to stop eating a sausage and scoffed three of my fingers. So this is a team I can empathise with. And whilst



the voice acting in *Hellas* isn't quite as absurd as *The Golden Horde*, their constant complaints of aching backs and reluctance to carry out the tasks that were asked of them put me in mind of wonderful Britain in its *Carry On...* era glory. Ed complains about waiting. But what's the problem with that? That's what games are for – to bring us closer, without consequence, to the Reaper.

Basically, as my dotage advances, I'm becoming a more forgiving, tolerant and incontinent man. And that's why, after searching my soul, I've decided to give this cheeky slice of identical shit pie an extra percent.

Jon Blyth



You won't find any of these games in the shops, but you can download them or get trial versions on our DVD.

indiezone

PCZONE
ON THE DVD

This month *Martin Korda* fights zombie hordes, throws rocks and defends a kingdom. It's all in a day's work...

INDIE ZONE
GAME OF THE MONTH

ZOMBIE SHOOTER

DEVELOPER Sigma Team WEBSITE sigma-team.net PRICE £10.50 (approx)

IF YOU'VE EVER played Sigma Team's massively addictive and unceasingly manic isometric blaster *Alien Shooter*, then you'll know exactly what to expect from *Zombie Shooter* – more carnage, only with shambling reanimated bodies replacing rapacious aliens.

Visually, *Zombie Shooter* is a definite upgrade from its predecessor, but given that *Alien Shooter* made an *Excel* spreadsheet look graphically adept, that's not saying much. But let's face it, games like this have never been about pretty animated pictures, but about

sheer numbers of enemies, and in this *Zombie Shooter* can't be faulted.

Straight from the off you're set upon by seemingly insurmountable odds, as legions of plodding corpses stalk towards you with unerring conviction. Thankfully, you're armed with some serious firepower, but even with these weapons of mass destruction it's not long before things get challenging, as heavily armed security guard zombies and ultra-tough mutations join the clamour for your intestines.

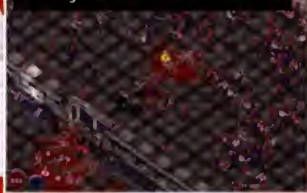
Each of the well-designed and varied indoor and outdoor levels is packed

with pickups, some in open view, others hidden in destructible boxes. You can also pick up wads of cash that can be spent at the end of each mission on equipment upgrades like body armour, night vision goggles and extra health, or on weapons ranging from dual pistols to magma miniguns and flamethrowers.

Zombie Shooter is undeniably frenetic with virtually no let-up. However, while the scopes of the firefights are impressive, it only takes a few hours for the whiff of repetition to start wafting through your blood-spattered nasal passages, despite a myriad of upgrade features, varied enemy types and a superb soundtrack that peps you up into a frenzied rage. Throw in some ropey enemy pathfinding and the fact you can lose your character behind walls at crucial times, and you're left staring at a manic, but slightly flawed, blasting extravaganza.

Despite its faults, *Zombie Shooter* remains an accomplished slaughter, which just about edges ahead of its extraterrestrial-themed predecessor. However, if you already own *Alien Shooter*, then you may want to give some serious thought to whether it's worth forking out another tenner for what is ostensibly the same game.

If only rain could kill zombies.



PCZONE
71
A bit samey, but a goody

STONELOOPS! OF JURASSICA

DEVELOPER Codemini **WEBSITE** stoneloops.com **PRICE** \$19.95 (£10 approx)

MY FEELINGS ABOUT the overabundance of match three games (or whatever number the developer decides on) within the indie market have been well documented in these pages. *Stoneloops!* may take a strong cue from PopCap's *Zuma Deluxe*, but it tweaks the gameplay enough, and adds some completely new modes that make this the game that *Zuma* should have been.

As a column of different coloured rocks rolls down a predefined, meandering route, you must pluck individual stones from the line and fire them back into clusters of matching coloured boulders. Match three or

more and you'll eliminate that group. Aiding you in your task are superb upgrades that range from time freezes, helpful dinosaurs that eliminate rocks, and spears and fireballs which eliminate stray stones.

The game also delivers a fair amount of longevity, with 75 levels that have been "handcrafted".

This mix of *Puzzle Bobble* and *Space Invaders* proves an excellent collaboration of ideas, which sets *Stoneloops! of Jurassica* apart from many of its far less imaginative peers and competitors.

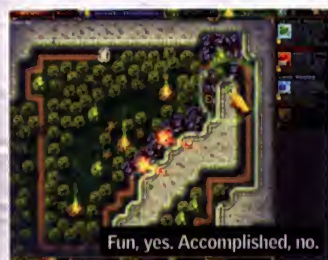
PCZONE
69



AZGARD DEFENCE

DEVELOPER Moregames **WEBSITE** moregames-pc.com **PRICE** £10 (approx)

NO MATTER HOW many times you play tower defence games, they never seem to lose their appeal. Perhaps it's the nature of their gameplay, in which you're tasked with setting up defences along a pre-determined route in order to stop enemies from reaching your base - that makes them so inherently enjoyable.



However, as we've often found in the past, all tower defence games are not equal. *Azgard Defence* sits somewhere between the elite and the uninspired. While it may boast 30 enemy types, there's very little to distinguish them, apart from a modicum of hit points and a different skin, though it's good to see aerial enemies present. The 15 towers are only slightly more imaginative, with gun, archery and elemental hard points making up the bulk of the collection.

Some poorly translated and sloppy text and no physical transformations for levelled-up towers adds further fuel to the argument that *Azgard Defence* is a very average game.

PCZONE
55



PCZONE Top 5 indie games



1

ROBOBLITZ

WEBSITE www.roboblitz.com

Reviewed Issue: 177

This stunning third-person action puzzler about a robot trying to defend a space cannon from attacking pirates is the highest scoring IndieZone game we've ever had. Packed full of physics-based puzzles, excellent combat and jaw-dropping Unreal Engine 3 visuals, you simply can't allow yourself to ignore this gem. If any game can destroy snobbery about indie games it's this one.



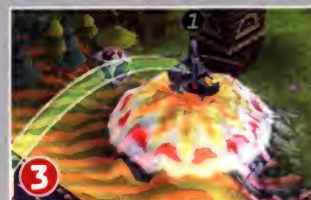
2

AVEYOND II: EAN'S QUEST

WEBSITE amaranthia.com

Reviewed Issue: 192

Play a young elf on a mission to save his friend from an evil snow queen in this massively accomplished RPG.



3

NAKED WAR

WEBSITE zee-3.com

Reviewed Issue: 177

A highly addictive and visually bold strategy game played by email in which your team of four soldiers must kill off the opposition.



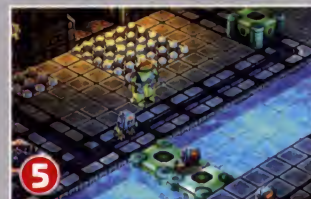
4

MORNING'S WRATH

WEBSITE morningswrath.com

Reviewed Issue: 163

A superbly written, beautifully crafted isometric RPG that leads you on an epic adventure to save your land from destruction.



5

MR. ROBOT

WEBSITE www.moonpod.com/english

Reviewed Issue: 181

An isometric *RoboBlitz* with zany RPG-style combat, you play a robot that must bring a malfunctioning starship back online.

BUDGET

Jon Blyth is feeling fine
for nine ninety-nine

**BUDGET
GAME
OF THE
MONTH**

FAHRENHEIT

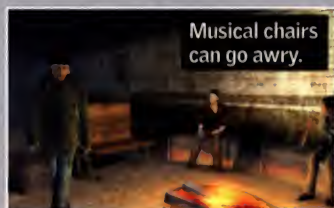
PUBLISHER: Mastertronic PRICE: £9.99

AFTER AN AMAZING opening scene, in which it feels like the video game and film-making genres have finally combined to create a creature that is both filmic and interactive, *Fahrenheit* loses a bit of momentum. But that doesn't stop it being a great game.

Fahrenheit's quality shines and the repetitive exercises before a bout of button-matching boxing and awful camera angles and controls, don't take anything away. At the risk of banging on



"Please sir, ask me!"



Musical chairs
can go awry.

about it, the many niggles in the game are counterbalanced by the sense of satisfaction that you come away with from playing it. Getting elbowed in the eye by a clumsy lover doesn't take so much away from the fact you're having decent sex. The plot's fantastic, and the way the game reacts and adapts to your actions is superb. This is a streak of story-telling innovation that no one has even attempted to match.

**PCZONE
84**



"Play Freebird."



Dead man walking. And running.
And jumping on helicopters.

THIS MONTH PCZONE SAVED MONEY BY...

Steve dumped his vibrating MACH3 for a cut-throat razor after seeing *Sweeney Todd*.
Saving: £30/month



Ed used his expired student card in a CD shop, defrauding HMV of £1.60.
Saving: 10%

Will broke his glasses, stopping him from going to the cinema and enforcing a nice night in with his missus.
Saving: £28 (two tickets, Revels and Coke)



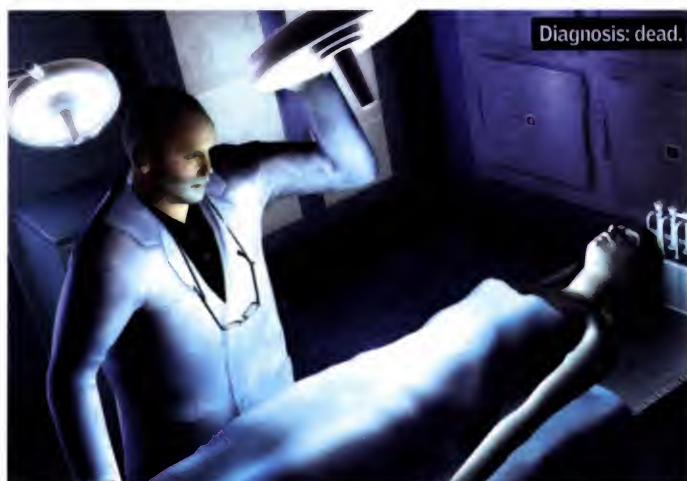
CSI: 3 DIMENSIONS OF MURDER

PUBLISHER: Focus/Multimedia
PRICE: £9.99

IF YOU'RE GOING to die, then you might as well get murdered in a hotel room full of fingerprints and spunky bedsheets. That's the *CSI* way, and when you realise it's by the same people who made *Sam & Max*, it's hard not to imagine Max committing exactly the kind of depraved and murderous act he's constantly threatening to.

The *CSI* games are great for anyone who wants to feel like a real police guy. Gather and analyse evidence, check your discoveries against a database, and repeat until you've got enough in your inventory to get an arrest. In theory, it's exciting. But translated into practice – to quote ourselves – you feel like a passenger in a crime that's solving itself.

**PCZONE
58**



Diagnosis: dead.



"Now where's my stash?"



Diagnosis: fingered.

AMAZING ADVENTURES

PUBLISHER PopCap/Steam PRICE \$9.99 (£5)

IF YOU LOVED *Mystery P.I.*, then you'll love *Amazing Adventures* precisely the same amount. That's because it's the same game. If, however, you haven't the faintest idea what we're talking about, then *The Lost Tomb* is the new game from PopCap, in which you click around a perfectly still image looking for a different items.

As far as passing time is concerned, it's a therapeutic and hypnotic way to lose a few minutes. Some of the items are cleverly camouflaged, and whilst the slightly Americanised language might spark some ambiguity in what you're actually looking for, that just soaks up more of the time you've clearly got to waste if you're playing this quasi-game.

In a world where humans lived indefinitely, this game would probably make for an idle distraction amongst

the new denizens of Mount Olympus. But there really isn't enough life in our bodies for this sort of blatant day-sponge. What next, PopCap? Sucking our fingers to a looped animation of a puppy going woof? A lobotomising drill that allows everyone to enjoy those bastard Flash animations of dancing kittens? You'd better hurry up with that *Peggle 2*...

PCZONE
40



CHRIS SAWYER'S LOCOMOTION

PUBLISHER: Mastertronic PRICE: £9.99

THIS DISAPPOINTING TITLE is from the same stable as the once solidly recommendable *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, and coincides with a re-release of *RC*'s third outing. This game is even emblazoned with "From the makers of *RC3*" – a compliment which isn't reciprocated. Or true.

This serious and interesting game from lone wolf developer Sawyer isn't a great evolution from his old *Transport Tycoon* games, and in terms of looks it's decades behind the latest *Rollercoaster*.

With massive maps challenging your ability to put together a coherent network, this will please sedate gamers. Just don't expect *Rollercoaster* action, despite what the misleading advertising on the box says.

PCZONE
62



And the rest...

This month's pick of the bargain basement offers



PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG

PRICE £5, Ubisoft

When something drops from £10 to £5, it's a cause for celebration. Especially when it's that other cause for celebration, a decent movie tie-in.

PCZONE
83



BRIAN LARA INTERNATIONAL CRICKET 2007

PRICE £10, Mastertronic

If you love cricket to the point where you can overlook the drudgery of this PC version, then £10 is a bearable loss.

PCZONE
63



PDC WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP DARTS 2008

PRICE £10, Oxygen

This is a game where you'll move your mouse hand ever so slightly up and down up to six times a minute. Dull.

PCZONE
37

PCZONE Top 5 budget games



1 DEUS EX

PRICE £5, Steam

After winning every Best Game Of All Time award around, it doesn't need flattering here. So, we won't. Buy this stupid idiot game for cretins today.



2 HALF-LIFE 2

PRICE \$19.95 (£10), Steam

The game that not only invented the 3D see-saw physics puzzle, but refuses to stop using it to this day, despite our repeated protests.



3 THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

PRICE £4.99, Mastertronic

The precursor to *Oblivion*, Bethesda's classic free-roaming RPG offers cheap goblin-bashing.



4 PSYCHONAUTS

PRICE \$19.99 (£9.99), Steam

Brilliant humour, creative level design and a range of psychic powers propel this quirky title into the stratosphere of the platforming greats.



5 SID MEIER'S PIRATES!

PRICE £15, Steam

Pirates! has the polish expected from the Meier name, and is more instantly fun than any game in the *Civ* series, without sacrificing depth.

BUYER'S GUIDE

Bargains at any price, these are the games you shouldn't be without...



PCZONE Top 6 THE RAINBOW 6

- 1 RED ALERT
- 2 ORANGE BOX
- 3 JAUNE'S F/A-18 (COUGH)
- 4 SPEC OPS 2: GREEN BERETS
- 5 HALF-LIFE: BLUE SHIFT
- 6 INDIGO PROPHECY



PCZONE Top 5 THE BEST GAME BOX FREEBIES

- 1 ONE SEPTIM COIN (OBLIVION)
- 2 BIT OF THE BERLIN WALL (WORLD IN CONFLICT)
- 3 TINY BIG DADDY (BIOSHOCK)
- 4 CHUPA CHUPS LOLLY (ZOO)
- 5 SINGLE SHEET OF SYSTEM SPECS AND INSTRUCTIONS (HALF-LIFE 2)



PCZONE Top 5 HORSE GAMES WE MUST HAVE NOW

- 1 GENTLEMAN'S HOOF O'CLOCK
- 2 THE EROTIC ADVENTURES OF SUGARLUMP & BUTTERDISH
- 3 URGENT PONY JUMP SQUADRON
- 4 OH, MR HANDS!
- 5 MY HORSE & ME 2



FPS

Must buy!



HALF-LIFE 2 • EPISODES

PCZ Issues: 148 (97%), 170 (91%), 187 (82%)

Excelling in terms of action, storyline, emotion and ingenious set pieces, the continuing adventures of Gordon Freeman have yet to be equalled. Yes, a moderate amount of the action has faded through repetition by the time the episodes kick in, but with its Combine-defying freedom fighting, this is still the most finely crafted shooter experience ever released on PC. Gordon's alive, and long may he remain so.



BIOSHOCK

PCZ Issue: 185 - 96%

The psion of *System Shock 2*, *BioShock* will suck you right into its intricate, art deco world. A destroyed Utopia under the sea, terrifying characters and emergent combat make this an unmissable experience.



TEAM FORTRESS 2

PCZ Issue: 187 - 93%

Beautifully balanced and engaging, Valve's update of the classic mod is a triumph, bringing together everything that's good about online shooters and topping it all off with superb animation that rivals Pixar's films.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT III

PCZ Issue: 189 - 90%

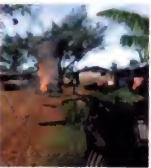
The daddy of online shooters returns with a mule-kick of intense deathmatch, epic vehicles, high-speed combat, Warfare mode, and a graphical sheen that outdoes its ageing insta-gib rivals.



BATTLEFIELD 2

PCZ Issue: 157 - 94%

If it's online action you want, look no further. *BF2* sets the gold standard for team-based shooting, with huge 64-player maps, squad and commander modes and the ability to zap people with medic shock pads.



CRYSIS

PCZ Issue: 188 - 92%

A retooled, condensed *Far Cry* for newer hardware, with *Crysis*'s neat nanosuit and 'anything can happen' action-bubble mentality making it a winner. The last act falters, but the Korean-bullying is endlessly replayable.



CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

PCZ Issue: 188 - 89%

Big, brash and extremely loud, *Infinity Ward*'s latest ultra-intense shooter offers some strikingly original military action. With superb multiplayer in tow, it's often an utter delight to play.

Strategy

Must buy!



COMPANY OF HEROES

PCZ Issue: 173 - 93%

Despite hailing from that most overpopulated of genres, the WWII RTS, *Company of Heroes* is still number one is a testament to how utterly refined and slick it is. Relic have taken the best bits from strategy games and stripped out the crap, leaving you with a game that's fun, intelligent, accessible, taxing, tactical and exciting. And with so many positives in one sentence, you know it must be good.



WORLD IN CONFLICT

PCZ Issue: 186 - 92%

A stunning RTS set at the height of the Cold War, offering innovative online play, a solid single-player campaign, jaw-dropping graphics and the best nuclear blast you've seen.



CIVILIZATION IV

PCZ Issue: 162 - 92%

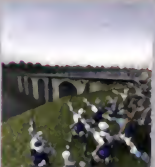
A Buyer's Guide without a *Civ* game would be a sorry place, and the latest version is the greatest yet. Now with added warmongering and diplomacy thanks to the expansion packs.



SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

PCZ Issue: 193 - 91%

This startling beauty came from nowhere, and quickly converted us from indifferent idiots into grateful idiots by surprising us with accessible complexity.



MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR

PCZ Issue: 175 - 91%

A blend of manic plotting on the strategic map and cheering with delight as your warriors collide spectacularly with your opponents' armies. Middle Ages war fun.



RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

PCZ Issue: 168 - 91%

Takes the great gameplay of *RON*, improves on it with elements from *Civ IV* and wraps the whole lot in a gorgeous sci-fi setting. An RTS bursting with innovation.



SUPREME COMMANDER

PCZ Issue: 179 - 88%

Huge battles of thousands of air, sea and land units? Giant stompy robots and a superb tactical map? One of the most original RTS titles around? Check, check and check.

Action/Adventure

Must buy!



GEARS OF WAR

PCZ Issue: 188 - 90%

Who knew the all-conquering console title would work so well with a mouse and keyboard? *GOW*'s skirmishes against the aggressive Locust Horde are enjoyably tactical, while its cover system and difficulty level combine to make you genuinely fear the bullets flying around you. With the battle against the almighty Brumak near the game's close, the PC has the best version of an already excellent shooter. So hooray for us.



MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE

PCZ Issue: 136 - 93%

Showing its wrinkles a bit now, but it shows how to do bullet-time right. Noirish tone, a growling voice-over and remarkable gun action mean that Payne is still a force to contend with.



GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

PCZ Issue: 155 - 92%

To think that the simple top-down car game has turned into this - a work of creative genius. Violent, brutal, smutty, freeform and hilarious - *San Andreas* is the pinnacle of gaming.



SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

PCZ Issue: 154 - 91%

A tour de force from Ubisoft, *Splinter Cell* format and runs with it in solo, co-op and the now well-established spies vs mercenaries multiplayer. Smooth, lithe and good with a knife.



FAHRENHEIT II: TOTAL WAR

PCZ Issue: 159 - 90%

Murder most foul, with you as the killer. Boasts a twisting, turning, brilliantly told story, featuring multiple character control, split-screen tension, branching scenes and several endings. From the brains behind *The Nomad Soul*.



PSYCHONAUTS

PCZ Issue: 156 - 90%

Clever, witty, impeccably detailed and absolutely off its rocker - *Psychonauts* is proof that the anarchic edge of LucasArts hasn't completely left us. A slightly flawed game in some respects, but still a dazzling feat.



BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

PCZ Issue: 138 - 89%

We heap praise on this game on a monthly basis, but it's for a reason. Michel Ancel's superb journey through the strange land of Hillis is nothing short of storytelling magic. It's cheap now, so go out and buy it.

MMOs

Must buy!



WORLD OF WARCRAFT
PCZ Issue: 152 - 95%
Blizzard's recreation of Azeroth doesn't disappoint. Beautiful to watch, absorbing to play and with more content than you can shake a magic stick at.



LOTR ONLINE
PCZ Issue: 182 - 87%
A near-perfect recreation of Tolkien's tales, with solid combat and engaging plots, in a tasty MMO bundle. Meet Gandalf! Play as a hobbit or a spider! Middle-earth awaits...



EVERQUEST II
PCZ Issue: 150 - 95%
EQII gives the original game a much-needed lick of paint, and adds a whole new world to play in and a greater sense of depth and immersion. A timesink in a good way.



GUILD WARS
PCZ Issue: 156 - 94%
How to make a gaming accessible to the masses. A lot of thought has been applied, and there are no subscription fees. Newbies can feel at home, thanks to a totally skills-based setup.



EVE ONLINE
PCZ Issue: 130 - 88%
Elite online has been a long-held fantasy, and this space sim has come the closest yet to making it a reality. A slow pace belies the options on offer, from mining to trading to piracy.

Simulation

BUDGET



X2: REUNION
PCZ Issue: 162 - 92%
Finally, a space sim to better *X2: The Threat*, and it just happens to be the sequel. Possibly the best-looking game ever to appear on a PC. Oh, and it plays pretty well to boot.



IL-2 STURMOVIK: FORGOTTEN BATTLES
PCZ Issue: 128 - 92%
While flight sims are getting rarer and rarer, at least the quality remains high. None are more impressive than this ultra-classy WWII combat sim. Chocks away, comrade!



MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR X
PCZ Issue: 175 - 89%
This latest iteration in the *Microsoft Flight Sim* series is the biggest since they started using actual polygons. What's more, the visuals may just sear your eyeballs.



FREELANCER
PCZ Issue: 128 - 84%
If *X2* is too slow for you, *Freelancer* should fit the bill. Plenty of trading, bounty-hunting and space piracy, but with the emphasis on action rather than realism. Space has never been this much fun.



SILENT HUNTER 4: WOLVES OF THE PACIFIC
PCZ Issue: 181 - 82%
If a life beneath the waves tickles your fancy, then this submarine simulator fits the bill. Tactics, torpedoes, sonar and sailors combine to make the ultimate ship-sinker.

Driving/Racing

Must buy!



GT2
PCZ Issue: 173 - 92%
Then pick up this scarily realistic driving sim and race the car of your dreams. It comes with an improved driving model, new modes and many other improvements.



GT LEGENDS
PCZ Issue: 161 - 92%
While *GT2* takes care of modern-day racing, *GT Legends*, a successor to *Grand Prix Legends*, does the business for historical driving. It's like the swinging '60s never ended.



LIVE FOR SPEED
PCZ Issue: 158 - 90%
Online racing at its best. *LFS* has realistic handling, hilarious crashes and a racing community second to none. A remarkable achievement by such a small team.



COLIN MCRÆ: DIRT
PCZ Issue: 183 - 88%
This time the rallying legend treats us to a host of other off-road events, an excitable Travis Pastrana and some of the best-looking graphics to grace any driving game on PC.



NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED
PCZ Issue: 163 - 88%
Thrill-packed racer with an emphasis on high-speed police chases and notoriety factors. You can still make like Westwood with the car pimping, though.

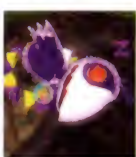
Oddball



PORTAL
PCZ Issue: 187 - 89%
Ingenious and absurdly funny, *Portal* is a four-hour slice of perfect puzzles and discovery. Hurling yourself through floors and walls sounds odd, but games are rarely more delightful.



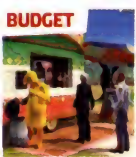
GARRY'S MOD
PCZ Issue: 179 - 88%
The god game-like *Garry's Mod* gives you the tools to create almost anything you can think of in the Source engine, from working robots to saucy ragdoll JPEGs. Try it out and see for yourself.



VIVA PIÑATA
PCZ Issue: 190 - 85%
Madder than a mercury-blooded clown, *Viva Piñata* looks simple but is a ridiculously addictive animal-raising sandbox game. Don't be put off by the kiddie graphics - it's a keeper.



PEGGLE DELUXE
PCZ Issue: 183 - 83%
A weeping unicorn and a sequence of bagatelle-inspired peg-bouncing puzzles combine to make a casual game of unparalleled addictiveness. If you doubt us, you haven't played it.



THE MOVIES
PCZ Issue: 162 - 95%
Life as a movie mogul - games don't get better than this. Not only a god/management game par excellence, but also a complete home movie-making kit. Build a studio and make your own films. Brilliant.

Sport

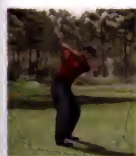
Must buy!



FOOTBALL MANAGER 2008
PCZ Issue: 188 - 90%
The latest version of the 'still playing at 3am' title is all about noob-attraction and an improved interface. As usual, *FM* succeeds, and is the best management sim on earth.



PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2008
PCZ Issue: 188 - 87%
Still in a different league to *FIFA*, *PES* lacks the official stamp but offers amazingly lifelike football. Whether it's end-to-end stuff or a nil-nil slog, it's always compelling.



TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 06
PCZ Issue: 161 - 85%
Not the most recent version, but still our favourite, *Tiger 06* has you time-travelling as Mr Woods. The best PC golf game yet, mainly thanks to the two career modes.



FIFA 08
PCZ Issue: 188 - 80%
A veritable compendium of all that is football, and a good sports game too, the recent *FIFA* still lags behind *PES*, but benefits from layers of EA spit and polish. A decent variant of the beautiful game.



NHL 08
PCZ Issue: 187 - 80%
Bringing the American sport we 'get' (it's like *Speedball!*) to our PCs, the latest *NHL* is chock-full of large Canadians knocking seven bells out of each other. Exciting, fast, smooth and exhilarating.

Role-playing games

Must buy!



THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION
PCZ Issue: 167 - 95%
Oblivion's sublime graphics, intuitive character-creation and massive freeform gameplay put paid to the myth that you have to own a beard to enjoy RPGs.



THE WITCHER
PCZ Issue: 188 - 88%
Adult and intelligent, the world of *The Witcher* is as fascinating as it is violent and corrupt. With moral bite and an epic story, this has come out of nowhere to revive an ailing genre.



KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC
PCZ Issue: 137 - 94%
KOTOR was the best *Star Wars* for years. Moving, dramatic and fairly adult in tone, it also has a hefty dose of lightsabers to keep you happy.



THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND
PCZ Issue: 116 - 94%
This could be the most intimidating yet wonderful game we've ever played - the breadth and depth of *Morrowind* remains a remarkable achievement.



DEUS EX
PCZ Issue: 93 - 94%
This is the benchmark in FPS RPGs. A twisting plot, exciting freeform levels and some moments of pure exhilaration and drama ensure *Deus Ex* remains the alpha male of gaming.

INCOMING!

All approximate monthly dates are correct at the time of going to press

June

ALONE IN THE DARK
LEGO INDIANA JONES

ATARI
ACTIVISION

Spring/summer

A VAMPIRE STORY
BROTHERS IN ARMS: HELL'S HIGHWAY
DEVIL MAY CRY 4
MERCENARIES 2: WORLD IN FLAMES
SPACE SIEGE
SPORE
STALKER: CLEAR SKY

ASCARON
UBISOFT
CAPCOM
EA
SEGA
EA
DEEP SILVER

Autumn/winter

AION - TOWER OF ETERNITY
EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR
FALLOUT 3
FAR CRY 2
GHOSTBUSTERS
LEFT 4 DEAD
LEGO BATMAN
PROJECT ORIGIN
PROTOTYPE
RED ALERT 3
SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION
TIBERIUM

NCISOFT
SEGA
BETHESDA
UBISOFT
VIVENDI
VALVE
WARNER BROS
WARNER BROS
VIVENDI
EA
UBISOFT
EA

TBC

MAFIA II
STARCRRAFT II
WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WRATH OF THE LICH KING

2K
BLIZZARD
BLIZZARD

Vote



26th ANNUAL
**GOLDEN
JOYSTICK
AWARDS**

for immortality!



Voting opens 19th May
Go to www.goldenjoystick.com

The **Golden Joystick Awards** are back and bigger than ever. It's simple:
only the games with the most votes will make it onto the illustrious
shortlist, so vote now to make sure your favourite is in there.
Voting begins Monday 19th May at www.goldenjoystick.com

**games
radar**

bliss

Nuts

**THE
Sun**
www.thesun.co.uk

1Xtra
BBC
DIGITAL RADIO

talent

Futura
MEDIA WITH PASS



PCZONE HARDWARE

Better gaming through technology

Loop o' death

MY COPY OF Vista had been pestering me to install Service Pack 1 and after a month of unchecking boxes I caved to Microsoft's demands and went ahead with the update.

I left the machine downloading the huge 400MB setup file one evening and went to eat dinner, talk to the dog and pat the wife. Peering down the corridor later, the room appeared to be bathed in delicate shade of blue and I could hear the familiar sound of a reboot. I walked back, sat down, put my cup of tea on the mouse mat and put a nervous look on my face.

Sure enough, it had all gone horribly wrong. Vista victims even have a name it – the "blue screen loop of death". I'd seen countless tales of woe from people who'd installed SP1 and watched it trash their machine. The problems they documented were the reasons I'd made a complete image of the drive beforehand. I'd just not expected to go so wrong.

I've since restored my PC to exactly as it was (though I did have to dismantle my RAID array, losing all my non-archived Steam data in the process), and one of my two nine-month-old hard drives is now inexplicably powering down at random intervals. I'm not sure I can pin that on installing SP1, but it's an odd coincidence.

In short, make sure you're all saved and backed up before taking the plunge. Or just don't bother.

Wand

Phil Wand, hardware editor

HYPERDRIVE!

Western Digital's new 300GB Raptor

THE OLD RAPTOR hard drive was never slow, but its performance quickly fell by the wayside when newer, bigger, faster drives appeared.

One terabyte monsters such as Hitachi's Deskstar 7K1000 and Samsung's HD103UJ offered gamers prodigious amounts of space together with unrivalled speed. And all for less than £150.

Western Digital have responded by increasing the Raptor's capacity from 150GB to 300GB and increasing performance by reducing the dual platter drive to a weird 2.5in form factor. To ensure that the new drives – marketed as VelociRaptors – still fit your PC's 3.5in mountings, they've been designed them to be suspended in

a finned cradle that doubles as a noise suppressor and a heat sink. Western Digital claim the setup makes the VelociRaptor no noisier than any other performance-oriented drive. Clever, eh?

The 10,000 rpm SATA unit has a 16MB cache, 3Gb per second interface, class-leading reliability and five-year warranty. In addition, Western Digital say it's a third quicker than the old design, while early benchmarks of engineering samples suggest they're faster than any rival.



WD's new VelociRaptor delivers you more space and more speed.

At £260 the VelociRaptor ain't cheap, but it's not aimed at those on tight budgets. These HDDs are for hardcore gamers who want the best inside their rigs.
wdc.com

X48 EXPRESS

Do enthusiasts really need two different Intel chipsets?

INTEL X48-BASED MOTHERBOARDS are in stock at online retailers, but how is the new flagship any different to the existing X38?

On the face of it, there's little to separate the two chipsets. The X48's trump card – official support for the 1,600MHz bus speed of Core 2 Quad QX9770 and QX9775 Extreme Editions – has already been worked into a number of cheaper X38 boards, with manufacturers such as ASUS and GIGABYTE ever keen to support the entire range of Core processors.

Of course, Intel's banking on the fact that anyone spending £1,000 on a flagship processor will want a £200 flagship chipset to go with it.

www.intel.com



GIGABYTE's X48 board looks and goes like their X38 board.

News round-up

Leaked beta drivers from NVIDIA reveal a set of new 9-Series cards: the 9600GS, 9500GS, plus 9300GE and GS. These cards are likely to be around the £50 mark and will rival the Radeon HD 3830. The company is also still on track to release the flagship GeForce 9900 this summer.
www.nvidia.com

MSI are gearing up to release their Wind notebook, an 8.9in rival to the ASUS Eee. The Wind PC is expected at the beginning of June and MSI will almost certainly pitch the mini lappy to match the cost of the £220 Linux-based Eee. A 10in variation of the Wind, with a 1024 x 600 resolution, is also expected.
www.msicomputer.co.uk

**WARNING:
THIS MONTH'S
HARD WORDS**
BY JON BLYTH

EVESHAM: The purest of pig meats, found in the Garden of Eden before Adam slipped the poor oinker a couple of fingers. **WINKEY & PAUSE:** A buddy movie starring Dennis Waterman as a man with a facial tic and 90 minutes to live. He's determined to make the most of his last hours on Earth, so is constantly infuriated by his companion, a hesitant bear called Pause, whose dithering takes up the final, angry moments of Winkey's life. **SECTION 75:** The name of a nightclub in which you would expect to find a goth chick in a cage. This nightclub mainly exists in movies *The Crow* and *Hellraiser II*.



DEAR WANDY

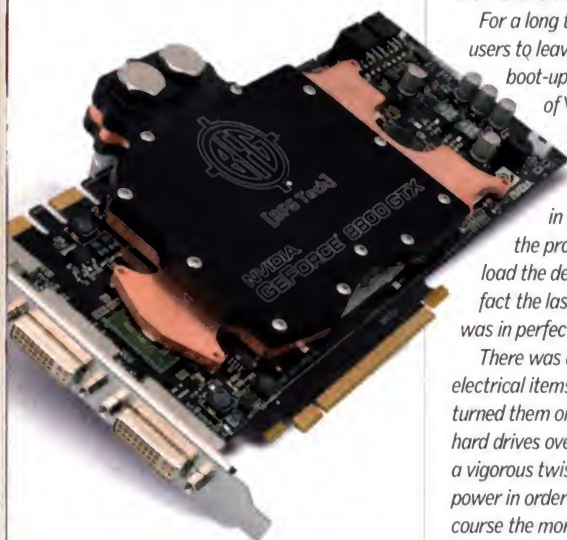
If it ain't broke, don't fix it. If it ain't working, don't panic...



PROBLEMS?

We've all got them, you know... Mistook your wardrobe for the toilet again? Local shop

stopped stocking your favourite blue-flavoured Pringles? Been playing *WOW* so long your partner's left you? We can't help with those (no, not even the Mighty Wandy), but we can solve all of your hardware hassles. Wandy knows everything and is willing to help if you email him at: wandy@dearwandy.com, including as much info as you can and system specs where applicable.



GPUs and CPUs are much cooler than they were.

Q GREEN DAY

I know it's better for the environment to turn my PC off, but is leaving it on the whole time better for the components? I remember reading that PCs shouldn't be powered up every day because it puts stress on the hardware. Is that right?

Elaine Jennings

A This is one of many computer-related questions without any easy or definitive response, meaning it's always cropping up in random places and with no two answers exactly the same.

For a long time, it was better for daily users to leave their computers on. The boot-up sequence for any version of Windows prior to XP took many minutes to complete, with Windows 98 famous for getting itself in a pickle halfway through the process and often refusing to load the desktop, regardless of the fact the last time you switched off it was in perfect working order.

There was also the problem of electrical items not working when you turned them on. I've had several aged hard drives over the years which required a vigorous twist when you applied the power in order to start the motor, and of course the more you switch them on and switch off, the more the components expand and contract with heat.

These days, with mechanical elements such as HDD motors lasting much longer and processors not getting as hot as they were, and with electricity not just being expensive but prone to browning out, your PC is best left off when you're not using it. Once it becomes the electronic 'hub' of your home – as it's predicted to

System Properties

System:
Microsoft Windows XP
Professional x64 Edition
Version 2003
Service Pack 2
Registered to:
Vertigo173
76588-306-0000007-51643

Computer:
AMD Athlon(tm) 64 Processor
3700+
2.21 GHz, 512 MB of RAM

How to find out what version of XP you're running: Winkey+Pause.

over the next decade – we'll probably go back to leaving it on again.

Q STARTING OVER

I was reading your article in issue 193 about overclocking my graphics card to get more power. I currently have a GeForce 7800 GTX, 3.6GHz Pentium 4 and 2GB RAM.

After running the 3DMark06 as you suggested, I was appalled to see my score came out at only 3,972 compared with 11,496 of Wired2Fire's Diablo Ultima reviewed that same issue. Is my processor really that slow?

I suppose the next stage of upgrade would be a motherboard and dual or quad core processor to go with the graphics card, but I don't know where to start. I was starting to think that it would be best to put this PC to bed

and start afresh with either of the two models you reviewed: the Chillblast Fusion Inferno or the Diablo.

The good news is that I managed to overclock my graphics card using your instructions, but unfortunately am still playing *Crysis* on low spec as I can only get 20.88fps on medium at 1280 x 1024 resolution.

Jamie Stogden

A My last gaming workstation was a 3.6GHz Pentium 4 with 2GB RAM and an X800 XT. It used to kick out some pretty sweet results in 3DMark03, and the frame rates in games at the time were consistently good enough to make me think the huge sum on my credit card bill was money well spent. It was a bit noisy going about things, but it never ceased to be anything less than rapid.

DRIVER WATCH

GRAPHICS

MANU	DESC	RELEASED
ATI	CATALYST 8.2	05 MAR 08
NVIDIA	FORCEWARE 174.74	01 APR 08

SOUND

MANU	DESC	RELEASED
CREATIVE	X-FI BETA 2.14.0001	09 JAN 08
CREATIVE	X-FI FOR VISTA 2.15.0004	05 NOV 07
CREATIVE	ALCHEMY (X-FI EDITION) 1.00.30	24 DEC 07
CREATIVE	AUDIGY, AUDIGY 2, AUDIGY 4 2.09.0016	9 OCT 06
CREATIVE	AUDIGY FOR VISTA 2.12.0002	10 MAR 07



The 8800 Ultra is a fab card, and even better if you have two.

"Technology will always accelerate away from you, whatever you have"

Everything changed when Intel released Core. Using 3DMark06's CPU benchmark, my old Pentium has less than one third the grunt of a £140 Q6600, and your 7800 GTX is left coughing in the trail of dust left by a £120 8800 GT. What I'm trying to say is, technology will always accelerate away from you, whatever you have.

Without knowing your motherboard, it's not possible for me to speculate what upgrades would make the most sense. You'll need to check the manufacturer's website for BIOS updates which may allow you to buy an older Conroe or Allendale processor, but for maximum thrust in Crysis you need to be looking at one of the newer 1333 FSB chips, faster memory and a 9-Series GeForce card.

Personally, I'd start saving for a brand new rig some time in the Autumn, spending £90 on an interim 8800 GTS to tide you over.

Q GETTING A NEW SERVICE PACK

Regarding your article in issue 190 about adding Windows XP to a Vista machine, can you please advise me? The XP disc I have is a Windows Home Edition recovery CD that accompanied a new Evesham PC some four years back. I also have an XP Service Pack 1 disc.

In your article, you advise on using XP Service Pack 2 (SP2). Can I use what I have already? If so, do I just use the SP1 disc – and if not, can I get XP SP2 for free or a nominal amount? I'm trying to put XP on a machine running Vista Home Premium 64-bit.

Steve Brankin

A Assuming that the Evesham recovery CD allows you to reinstall Windows from nothing, and doesn't simply copy over a bunch of system files from a hidden partition on your hard disk, you'll be fine.

As for SP2, this is Microsoft's roll-up of security updates and miscellaneous fixes that is provided free to XP owners,

so it's not a separate product, though when you buy Windows at retail, you need XP with SP2 as the setup process is painless compared to earlier versions.

Once your original XP setup has finished, either visit Windows Update or Google for 'xp service pack 2 network' and grab the full 266MB download – it's useful to have the standalone SP2 package in case you need it again in the future. Run the download, step through the wizard and you're done.

Q BEEF SANDWICH

After recently purchasing a new rig, I was for the first time in a long while happy with my PC performance. Sadly my contentment was shattered with the release of the new GeForce 9800 GPUs. Because I'd bought my current 8800 Ultra Super within the last three months, I've been offered the 'step up' option where I can upgrade to the 9800 GX2 for the difference between the two cards.

I was about to do this and get my new GeForce, but it's been suggested that the 9800 is just two 8800 GTs running in SLI, and that the performance increase will be negligible on games that do not have SLI profiles. If this is the case, should I get the upgrade?

Mike Laing

A As an 8800 Ultra owner, there is little reason for you to move up to the 9800 GX2 unless the price you're being asked to pay is less than £50. While the GX2 will give you the option of an upgrade to Quad SLI – assuming the board supports SLI – you'll become a slave to NVIDIA's drivers and you'll experience new levels of noise and all the fun of heat build up.

The GX2 is a great card, but when you already have a product that's capable of giving you the same results in the real-world, getting one doesn't make much sense. **PCF**

ELEMENTARY LESSONS IN PC TECH...

More than half of DrayTek's range is wireless capable.



03 WIFI

You've probably noticed how pretty much every gadget you buy these days has WiFi capability, whether it's your PC, mobile phone or games console. What this means is that it can connect to the internet whenever you're standing inside a wireless network – be that at home, on the train, or even while sitting in a coffee shop in the high street.

Each wireless network, or WLAN, uses the same international standard known as IEEE 802.11. There are different versions of this standard – 802.11a, 802.11b, 802.11g and 802.11n – each offering different ranges and speeds. While 802.11b and 802.11g are the most common, you shouldn't concern yourself with this aspect of the technology as incompatibilities are rare.

Every WLAN contains at least one access point (AP) that broadcasts the network's name (its SSID), this human-readable name allows you to browse through local networks and identify the one you want.

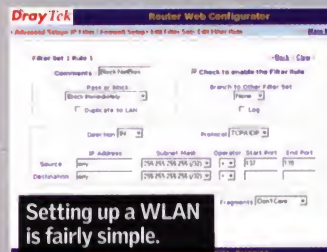
Many modern broadband routers have APs built into them, so you can create a WLAN simply by checking a box in its setup routine.

To connect a wired device such as your PC or a printer to a

WLAN, you need a wireless bridge. You connect to this device using a standard network cable, and the bridge connects your PC to the WLAN. You can also buy wireless network cards and USB dongles which can connect to WLANs directly.

Security is a major aspect of WiFi. When setting up your own WLAN, make sure you switch on WPA2 security and provide a key (ie a password). This offers the best protection against ne'er-do-wells. And remember to make a note of the key and put it somewhere safe (ie not in a text file called "wifi password" stored in My Documents).

If you can't use WPA2, use WPA, 128-bit WEP or 64-bit WEP security – in that order of preference.



Setting up a WLAN is fairly simple.

FORUMS:
DIRECT FROM
DEARWANDY.COM

(TechnicolorYawn) My PC resets itself every 20 minutes or so. I have a feeling something's broken inside but I can't think what. First impression was the PSU but it doesn't seem to make any difference what I'm doing. It happens if it's sat at the desktop doing nothing and it happens when I load up the Crysis demo. It's just a straight reset as if I hit the button on the front, there's no blue screen or anything. It hangs for about two seconds before it resets too. (Gavpowell) Try downloading a Linux LiveCD (Puppy Linux is good, I find) and booting from that. If Linux stays up and running, your issue is with Windows, otherwise, you have a hardware problem.

HOW TO...

REMEMBER:

Upgrading a PC's memory may require you to remove components to get access to the slots RAM sits in. This isn't brain surgery, but you'll need an understanding of your motherboard's layout and the dangers of static.

NEED:
Windows PC
TIME:
Ongoing
DIFFICULTY LEVEL:



PHIL WAND
HAL 9000
MEDIUM DOOFUS
PETER GRIFFIN
Jamie Sefton

KNOW YOUR MEMORY

Do you know how much memory your PC has and what type it is? Most people haven't the foggiest says *Phil Wand*

MEMORY IS YOUR computer's factory floor, where information from the processor is held before being assembled into code that does things. This is your PC's primary storage device, meaning it's more important than your hard drive. Nothing will run without it.

The memory you have on your motherboard takes the form of short

'sticks' and is known as Random Access Memory (RAM) because it allows the CPU to read and write random bits of data without the need for it to be stored in a contiguous fashion, such as on a CD-ROM. RAM is also volatile. This doesn't mean it'll explode, but that the

data it holds is lost when the power goes, unlike flash memory.

If you're running Windows XP or later, you don't need to know exactly how it works, or the inner workings of computer to ensure your system has the right amount. Read on to find out why.

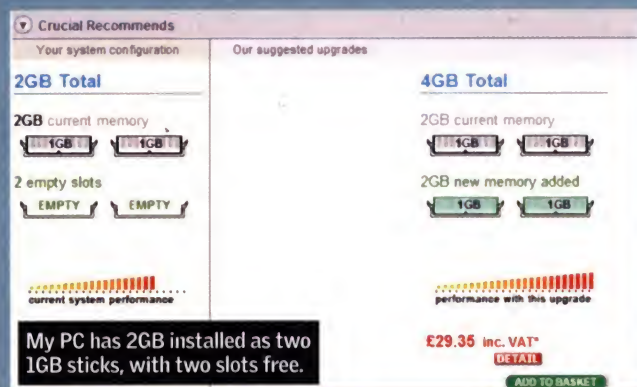
"The more RAM you have, the more efficient your PC becomes"

01 KEEPING THE LID ON THINGS

There was a time when you had to remove the lid to your PC and eyeball the motherboard in order to find out what memory you had installed, and whether you could add more.

Now you can visit one of a number of free system scanners, such as the one provided by memory supplier Crucial at crucial.com/uk/systemscanner, to find out exactly what's inside your PC. The box at the top tells you how the RAM is organised on your motherboard.

Ignore Crucial's suggested upgrades for now, we'll go through those in a bit.



02 MORE IS BETTER

Generally speaking, the more RAM you have, the more efficient your PC becomes. Without enough system RAM, Windows resorts to using a predefined area of your hard drive called the swap file (see Huh?) as a memory. If you hear your drive thrashing around while you're playing a game, there's a chance you're using more RAM than is available on your motherboard.

Once you've established what's in your PC, look at the chart to see how a memory upgrade will affect your system's performance.

EFFECTS OF UPGRADING RAM

Total RAM after upgrade	512MB		1GB		2GB		4GB	
Current RAM	XP	VISTA	XP	VISTA	XP	VISTA	XP	VISTA
256MB	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
512MB			✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
1GB					✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
2GB							✓✓✓	✓✓✓

✓ SMALL GAIN ✓✓ JUST NOTICEABLE ✓✓✓ WORTHWHILE ✓✓✓✓ RECOMMENDED ✓✓✓✓✓ WHOOSH

HUH?

The swap file on a modern Windows computer is a file on the HDD called `pagefile.sys`. By

default it's located in the root of your system partition, but it can be relocated to other drives.

Double data rate memory (DDR), used inside PCs, sends signals twice on each cycle of the system clock. DDR is also available as DDR2 and DDR3, with DDR2 being twice as fast as DDR, and with DDR3 four times as fast. DDR3 is not related to GDDR3, a type of fast memory found in graphics cards.

CAS stands for Column Address Select and CL for CAS Latency. The lower the CL, the faster your RAM.

ECC is used on servers to fix errors which occur during memory operations. It also blunts performance. Unless a motherboard demands it, buy non-ECC RAM. You can tell if you're using ECC RAM by counting the chips on each RAM stick. ECC modules have a total divisible by three or five.

03 UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'VE GOT

There are dozens of different memory types, and only a handful are suitable for any given system. You can't just buy 'some memory' because there's a high chance it won't fit your motherboard or work with what you have.

Go back to Crucial's system scanner and look at the Specifications box. You'll see a detailed description of the type of RAM in your system, denoted with letters and numbers such as PC2-5300 or PC-3200.

Make a note of this, then read the notes to find out if your PC has specific requirements (eg if you need to buy new modules in pairs).

Your Dell XPS 410 Specifications

Currently installed memory:



Each memory slot can hold DDR2 PC2-4200, DDR2 PC2-6400, DDR2 PC2-5300 with a maximum of 1GB per slot.*

*Not to exceed manufacturer supported memory.

Maximum Memory Capacity: 4096MB

Currently Installed Memory: 2GB

Available Memory Slots: 2

Number of Banks: 4

Dual Channel Support: Yes

CPU Manufacturer: GenuineIntel

CPU Family: Intel(R) Core(TM)2 CPU 6600 @ 2.40GHz Model 15, Stepping 6

CPU Speed: 2400 MHz

Although the memory can be installed one module at a time, the best performance comes from using matched pairs of modules.

Q: Will my system recognize the maximum upgrade?

Q: What memory goes into my computer, and can I mix speeds?

Q: How much memory can my computer handle?

Q: Do I have to install matching pairs?

My PC is using a type of
DDR2 RAM called PC2-5300.

04 KNOW WHAT TO BUY

If you're adding to RAM, you need to buy the memory type you made a note of in step 3. Make sure you've enough free slots to hold the new RAM. If not, you'll need to remove what you have. For example, if there are four slots on your board and you have four 512MB modules totalling 2GB, you'll need to replace them with four 1GB sticks to

reach 4GB. When replacing all the RAM in a system, get the fastest type your board supports (though Intel Core owners should read Hot Tip). To do this, look for the number in the memory type (for example PC3-12800) which denotes the transfer rate. As a general rule the higher the number, the more capable the chip.

Dual-channel kits are two modules with the same specs.



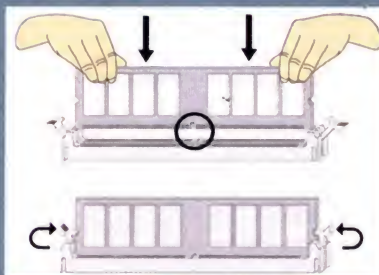
05 INSTALLING THE RAM MODULES

Disconnect all the cables from your PC and put the case on your desk. Reconnect the mains cable, but turn off the mains socket and the PSU – the PC needs to be earthed, not powered.

Before touching anything, touch the case to discharge any static that's built up on you. Open the lid and look for the installed RAM.

Remove existing modules by pushing the clamps away from the RAM. The modules will rise, letting you to lift them out.

Make sure the clamps are open and push the RAM in, making sure the notch in the module aligns with the notch in the slot. Push firmly, but don't force the modules in.



QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS!

Q My RAM isn't the fastest type that my board will support. Is it worth upgrading?

A Unless you're planning to overclock, match what you have. You'll be hard pushed to tell the difference anyway.

Q Which brand of memory should I get?

A Get the best value memory you can find, but avoid value brands.

Q Does memory go wrong?

A Yes. RAM is highly susceptible to static charges and to any electrical damage, such as that caused by a faulty PSU.

Q Do I need to configure the memory in the BIOS?

A No. You shouldn't need to configure memory unless you're trying to overclock or troubleshoot your system.

HOT TIP:
MATCH YOUR
RAM'S SPEED

Exactly how fast an Intel CPU talks to RAM depends on their connection, something known as the front-side bus (FSB). To find out a CPU's FSB speed, run CPU-Z from cpuid.com and note down the Rated FSB of your chip. The RAM which best partners it runs at the same speed, or at a multiple of it. You can divide a RAM stick's transfer rate by eight to find a rough guide of its speed – eg PC-3200 RAM has a speed of 400MHz (3200 ÷ 8 = 400) and PC3-6400 has a speed of 800MHz (6400 ÷ 8 = 800). If you have a Core 2 Duo E6600 with an FBS of 1066MHz, the ideal RAM for you is PC2-8500. You could also use PC2-4200 RAM, because this has a bus speed of 533MHz – half of 1,066.

SCREEN DEMON

The Fusion Juggernaut includes Samsung's SM-245B LCD, the 24in relation of our Buyer's Guide favourite, as well as a keyboard, mouse and speakers. Separately they'll cost you almost £400, meaning the real cost of the base unit is just over £1,100.

When buying a machine with a screen and peripherals included, make sure you calculate the cost of buying those items on their own and be certain they're what you want. While they might seem like bonus items, you are paying for them – and if you have an LCD you like already, all you're doing is wasting money.



FUSION JUGGERNAUT

PRICE £1,549 MANUFACTURER Chillblast AVAILABLE FROM chillblast.co.uk

THIS MAY BE an awful cliché, but the Fusion Juggernaut is the most awesome machine we've ever had on test. And it also ends up pretty high up the charts for value, despite costing £1,549.

This is because the Juggernaut's price includes Samsung's SM-245B 24in screen, Saitek's Eclipse 2 keyboard, Creative's T7900 surround speaker set and my favourite clicker, Razer's Diamondback mouse. You also get a two-year collect-and-return warranty.

The base unit is Cooler Master's handsome CM690 case and includes a GeForce 9800 GX2 – currently the fastest single card on sale – paired with Intel's 2.66GHz Q9450 processor. This Core 2 Quad has a 12MB cache (twice the size of my first hard drive) and has been tweaked to run at 3.4GHz.

"Money is no object for some. And the Juggernaut is for them"

3DMark06 returns a score of 18,267, *Counter-Strike: Source* is a whisker from 300fps, and *Crysis* no longer feels like you're playing it over dial-up, being smooth and enjoyable throughout. Even at the SM-245B's native resolution you'll be seeing around 30fps and while that's hardly ideal for an action shooter, it's certainly playable.

The whole affair is also pleasingly quiet, a brace of large diameter fans plus a Freezer 7 Pro CPU cooler doing an excellent job of keeping temperature under control. Added to which, the GX2 isn't anywhere near as noisy as you might think – it's just rapid.

While I often say that you needn't spend over £699 on your next PC, money is no object for some people. And the Juggernaut is for them.



PCZONE
90
Power, but it costs ya

"Despite its cost, benchmarks showed this machine is a very capable gamer"



CUSTOM BUILD



PRICE £563 **MANUFACTURER** Computer Planet
AVAILABLE FROM www.computerplanet.co.uk

COMPUTER PLANET ALLOW you to cherry pick from a baffling range of components when configuring your new machine.

There are 18 memory configurations, almost 40 cases, and more than 36 video cards including four Radeon HD 3870 X2s set in quad CrossFire mode. The machine I went for had the least exciting chassis, an AMD Phenom 9850 Black Edition, ASUS M2R32-MVP motherboard with 2GB RAM, a GeForce 9600 GT and 250GB SATA HDD. Warranty is 12 months with the option to add more.

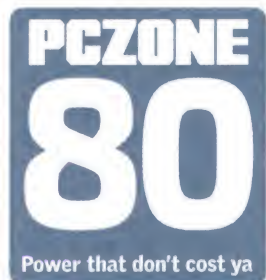
Pleasingly, you can elect to omit an operating system, leaving you to install and configure the one you have already, not to mention shave £50 off the price.

The build process is described to you over email at each stage, and provides a very good indication of when you can expect delivery. Computer Planet are expected to exceed £2m in sales this year, and they do give out an impression of a well-oiled business machine.

Despite costing just £560 benchmark results showed this PC is a capable gamer. *3DMark06* returned to the desktop with a score of 10,756 and *Supreme Commander* wriggled past 17,000, putting this PC in the same ballpark as Wired2Fire's £699 Diablo Ultima (issue 193, 92%). Meanwhile *Counter-Strike: Source* gave 240fps and *Crysis* on High reported 31fps.

I had two issues with my machine. The first was a bent panel lug on a

chassis panel, cured by simply bending it back. The second was that the QFan settings had been switched off in the BIOS, meaning the processor cooler was running at 5,500rpm almost constantly. With QFan switched on, I could hear myself think again.





WATCHDOG

Richard Cosgrove fights the good fight. And wins! Usually...

HERE TO HELP!

Companies pissing you off? Don't feel your voice is strong enough to shout down the suits? Or has a company done something so great you want to nominate them for a 'Saints Not Sinners' mention? Email Richard at watchdog@pczone.co.uk with the subject heading 'Watchdog', or write to him at the address above. Remember to include your name, address and contact number, and all purchasing details such as reference and invoice numbers, and RMAs.

"Evesham won't be repairing or replacing any faulty goods. But help is at hand from another source"

evesham TECHNOLOGY

ACCUSED: Evesham

PROBLEM: Vanishing act

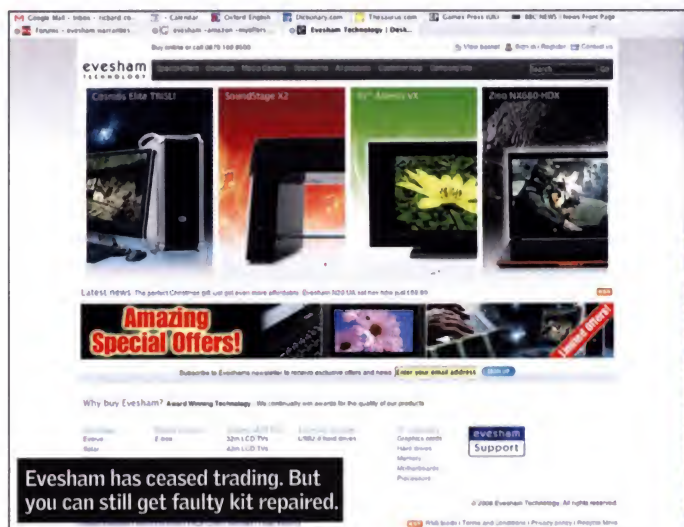
Reader Matthew Regan got in touch with *Watchdog* about the cut-price electronics retailer Evesham. While he was trying to get his Evesham PC fixed, the company went into receivership.

PC ZONE INVESTIGATION: Evesham's financial problems lead the retailer to close down its high street stores. The e-tail business (www.evesham.com) was bought up and continued trading, but later shut down too. This means Evesham won't be repairing or replacing any faulty goods. But help is at hand from an unexpected source.

Section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 makes credit card companies as liable as retailers if a product is faulty, as long as the product cost between £100 and £30,000. This also applies if you only made a partial payment with a credit card.

This means Visa et al must pay to repair or replace, or give a refund, if an Evesham product breaks down.

There are downsides: Section 75 only applies to credit cards – not pre-paid cards (eg Mastercard cashplus), debit cards (eg Visa Debit and Electron, Solo and Maestro) and charge cards (Diners Club and American Express). And you



can expect the credit card company to want copies of the item's warranties, terms and conditions of sale, and ask for an independent report on the product's fault (which you may have to pay for).

For a full explanation of Section 75, visit the Financial Ombudsman Service website snipurl.com/section75

Similar laws apply to goods purchased from Evesham using hire-purchase agreements. As the finance company owns the goods until the final payment, they are responsible for ensuring the product works. However, other financing agreements (eg fixed term, standard agreements or condition sale) don't offer any protection. But such financiers are expected to help resolve problems you have, although they have no obligation to pay out anything.

There's more good news – some companies are offering support for Evesham products. Total Care Support (totalcaresupport.com) are offering new warranties for a monthly fee. While Tewktech (www.tewktech.com) offers case-by-case help for Evesham PC owners.

FINAL VERDICT: Section 75 can offer some help, but you may better off getting a new warranty.

microdirect

ACCUSED: MicroDirect

PROBLEM: Incomplete refund

Howard Angel ordered a Gainward Geforce 8800GTS Bliss PCI-E graphics

card over the phone from MicroDirect. But Howard received a Gigabyte 8800GTS card. MicroDirect said the card Howard wanted was no longer in stock, so he could return it for a refund but he'd have to pay for the postage.

The card was collected by courier on the 29 January. On the 15 February Howard received his refund – less £346.

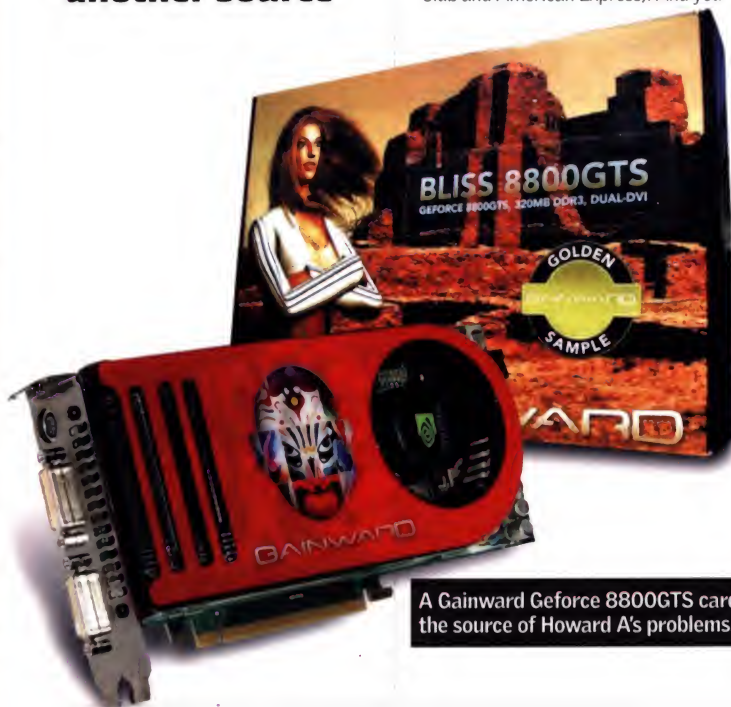
PC ZONE INVESTIGATION: As Howard ordered the graphics card over the phone, he's protected under the Distance Selling Regulations.

These give anyone buying goods by website, phone or mail order a seven-day window to inform the seller they are returning the goods. And you don't even have to give a reason. Once this is done, the seller has to accept the return and give a complete refund. The seller can't make any deductions (restocking fees or postage costs for example); the refund must be total.

Fortunately, a fortnight later Howard received a full refund from MicroDirect. According to MicroDirect, they'd forgotten to refund a surcharge for paying by credit card, so he was only refunded the cost of the card.

As MicroDirect supplied Howard goods that were different to what he ordered, he could have sought a refund from his credit card company. Another way Section 75 makes itself useful.

FINAL VERDICT: Miscommunication within MicroDirect meant Howard lost out. But not for long. **PCZ**



A Gainward Geforce 8800GTS card – the source of Howard A's problems.

REMEMBER:
GET BETTER
HARDWARE AND
FIGHT EVIL

The acquisition of faster and more powerful hardware isn't only aiding your sense of self-worth, but also saving thousands of imaginary people from terrorists, big dragons, robots, Hitler and the like.

HARDWARE DIVIDE

We see plenty of new gear at *PC ZONE*, but these are the bits we just adore

LOADED?

GRAPHICS

9800 GX2

EXPECT TO PAY £370
MANUFACTURER ASUS
WEBSITE uk.asus.com

Pound coins weighing you down? The GX2 is the first card capable of making *Crysis* look like a game rather than a slideshow. While it's matched by two 8800 GT cards in SLI, the flagship 9-Series remains the fastest – and most expensive – single card solution on sale.

PROCESSOR



CORE 2 QUAD EE QX9775

EXPECT TO PAY £1,000
MANUFACTURER Intel

WEBSITE intel.co.uk

A silly price makes for awesome power and magical performance. Not only will your Extreme Edition chip cost you the same as several entire PCs, but like everything else in your PC it'll be obsolete in two years. If you've got the money, what the hell!

MOTHERBOARD



D975XBX2

EXPECT TO PAY £155
MANUFACTURER Intel
WEBSITE intel.co.uk

Everything that was good about our long-term favourite D975XBX, only with a thick coating of overclocking goodness. Intel's flagship desktop product represents all that's good about their products: solid, reliable, no-nonsense and fast. Saddle up with a Core 2 Duo and away you go!

HDD



WD7500 AAKS

EXPECT TO PAY £109
MANUFACTURER Western Digital

WEBSITE wdc.com

Almost as fast as the 150GB Raptor, but with five times the capacity and half the noise. Products like the WD7500AAKS and Hitachi's Deskstar 7K1000 are now so quick that you don't need to be spend extra on 10,000rpm drives. So don't.

SCREEN



SM226BW

EXPECT TO PAY £219
MANUFACTURER Samsung

WEBSITE samsung.com/uk

The Samsung SM226BW is handsome and fast – just 2ms grey to grey – and has no hint of the motion sickness that plagued LCDs a few years ago. It produces a bright, evenly lit image that's full of reverberant colours, sharp edges and dark blacks.

SOUNDCARD



SOUND BLASTER X-FI FATALITY FPS

EXPECT TO PAY £130
MANUFACTURER Creative Labs

WEBSITE uk.europe.creative.com

Slightly bonkers soundcard for audiophiles. Supports EAX 5.0, with 64MB X-RAM for top-quality sound effects. CMSS-3D works magic on a stereo signal and makes headphone gaming crystal.

SPEAKERS



Z-5500

EXPECT TO PAY £195
MANUFACTURER Logitech

WEBSITE www.logitech.co.uk

The price has dropped below £200 and these speakers are simply the best we've ever tested. Games and movies ravish your ears, and you'll soon find yourself dusting off from your old CDs just so you can sit in the middle of the sound and revel in it.

SKINT?

GRAPHICS

GeForce 8800GT

EXPECT TO PAY £142
MANUFACTURER XFX
WEBSITE XGXforce.com

Ladies and gentlemen, the card of the moment. While we've yet to put a retail GeForce 8800 GT against its Radeon opponents, reference benchmarks have shown that the NVIDIA box is the one to buy. Just avoid those fussier model variants that sail close to £200.

PROCESSOR



CORE 2 DUO E2180

EXPECT TO PAY £55
MANUFACTURER Intel

WEBSITE intel.co.uk

At the budget end of things, it's a tough choice between the E2180, E4500 and E8200. Unsurprisingly, things get faster the more you pay, but the E2180 here is a flexible engine that's great for gentle gaming or an overclocking frenzy.

MOTHERBOARD



CONROE EX-FIRE ESATA2

EXPECT TO PAY £60
MANUFACTURER ASRock

WEB asrock.com

Paired with an E6300, this ASRock board can wring high-end performance from a budget rig. It features a 1066/800/533MHz FSB, SATA II with RAID, 7.1 HD audio onboard, CrossFire support, Gigabit LAN and ASRock's easy overclocking features.

HDD



CAVIAR 1600AAJS SATA-II

EXPECT TO PAY £30
MANUFACTURER Western Digital

WEBSITE www.wdc.com

A 160GB hard drive remains more than enough for the casual gamer to do a spot of casual gaming. A few good titles, Steam, a couple of thousand music files and the odd porn flick still leaves plenty of room for Windows to manoeuvre.

SCREEN



VA903M

EXPECT TO PAY £118
MANUFACTURER ViewSonic
WEBSITE www.viewsonic.co.uk

The VA903m is a better bet than any of the similarly-priced widescreen variants as there are more pixels on its 19in screen: its 1280 x 1024 pixel panel offers greater depth than the standard 1440 x 900 panels of its peers.

SOUNDCARD



SOUND BLASTER AUDIGY 2 VALUE

EXPECT TO PAY £20

MANUFACTURER Creative Labs

WEBSITE uk.europe.creative.com

The cheap Audigy features EAX 4.0 and Dolby Digital EX support. This card makes an awful lot of sense for casual gamers, as there's little point throwing half a mortgage payment at your soundcard.

SPEAKERS



X-530

EXPECT TO PAY £55
MANUFACTURER Logitech

WEBSITE logitech.co.uk

Logitech's X-530s have the edge on quality and are available everywhere. This Swiss-designed 70W, 5.1 system offers Logitech build quality with superb sound in games, movies and music. And for £55 their value can't be beat.



**We've got you
in our sights**



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PCZONE FREEPLAY



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**FREE
GAMES!**

WHAT'S FREE THIS MONTH

Space Race

EVE ONLINE IS an intimidating monster of a game, a star-warring re-imagining of the universe in the image of Corby. It's heartless, cruel, immense and unforgiving, with a criminal at every corner and the chance of losing everything haunting you ominously. From the generation of *EverQuest* players that sneers at gamers who have such niceties as "quests" and "a reason to actually play beyond addiction", even I was nearly scared away by the fact that, ultimately, *EVE* doesn't really help you do anything. It gives you a two-hour tutorial and then throws you into the infinite emptiness of space with not so much as a pat on the head or a wish of good luck, with many of the menus still as incomprehensible as hieroglyphics.

With Mr Hogarty shaking his head at me, I joined a corporation that actively encouraged me to enter the depths of O.O Space – free from the "laws" and *EVE*'s police force. A mere two minutes into my new career in the Wild West of the universe, I happened upon a nice man from a corporation called Band of Brothers. He gave me two options – "ISK or die" – with ISK being *EVE*'s currency, and die meaning that without ISK, he'd make me die. Maybe I'm a fool, but I set my space-guns to his face, and said, "NO, YOU DIE." Then he shot me with a laser, blew up my ship, and then shot my pod, waking me up in a Medical Bay in a distant station.

I came back to life raring to go, and as a corporation member rolled his eyes and threw a new frigate into my hands, we set out on a new mission: to crush that Band of Brothers, a corporation of players we don't like for a reason I'm not entirely positive about. Just like real life!

Ed Zitron

Ed Zitron, Disc Editor



106 Demo pages

Sinning in space has never been this fun...



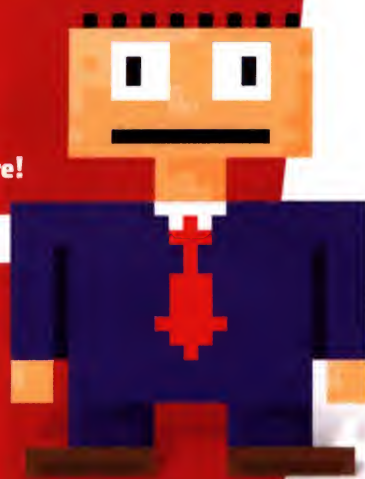
110 News

The Witcher, *Project: Valkyrie*, *Trackmania Nations Forever* and more!



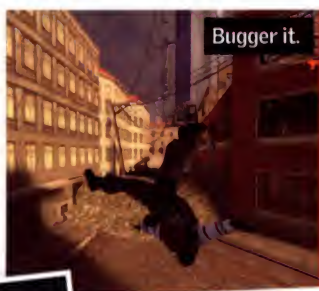
112 Freeware

Steve Hogarty finds inexplicable ways to top himself



114 Play

It's a mad world full of cars, guns and paper balls...



116 Online Zone

What we do all day on the internet



**PCZONE
FREE-O-METER**



0
HOURS

*Approximate amount of completely free stuff this month



253.6
HOURS*

(This month's free-o-meter gag relies on the fact that the bloke on the left is a philosopher called John Locke. Like something that locks. The punchline – that Freema woman from Doctor Who – you know, Doctor Who's rebound assistant after Billie Piper left – is more obvious. But no more amusing. Zitron has now been freed. – Ed)

FREE DEMOS

Demos

What's got more demos than hands? *Ed Zitron*, of course...

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

Make your first steps towards intergalactic conquest...

WEBSITE www.sinsofasolarempire.com

PCZONE

ON THE DVD

Having problems getting something on our DVD to work? Phone our helpline on 01225 442244 and ask for cover disc support. Or email support@futurenet.co.uk, including as much information as possible about your system and the nature of your problem.



Go go gadget warp!



Nuts, I broke it.



Quiet, I think Jupiter's spotted us!

S*INS OF A Solar Empire* took everyone by surprise by turning out to be one of the finest strategy games in years, bagging itself a PC ZONE Classic award. Taking the finer elements of *Homeworld*, mixed in with *Civilization*'s research and economic strategy, it all made for an engrossing experience. This demo delivers 90 minutes of mostly open gameplay. You've got three maps and all of the research and upgrade options open to you.

You'll only be able to play as the human TEC faction, but you can get a fair way into a map and see a decent amount of what makes Ironclad's RTS such a delectable and accessible strategy gem before the demo ends. Included with the demo are excellent tutorial missions, which balance training and hands-on gameplay, with no condescending "Oh, so you're new here?" twaddle.

Sins of a Solar Empire has even won over our resident strategy cynics, and may be the title that finally brings over strategically bereft curmudgeons to the PC's most loveable genre. So, please, do give this awesome demo a go.



COLONISE THIS

When you find a new galaxy, send a few scout ships in to find out whether it's got a colonisable planet, but also see if there're any dastardly space pirates waiting to throw you a nasty party.



FRIGATE ABOUT IT

Spend a little money to research further into the military tree to pick up some of the better ships - such as the Kodiak, a bomber frigate that, in large groups, can destroy even the mightiest planetary defences.

THE EASIEST WAYS TO CONQUER THE GALAXY...



HAND IN HAND

If you're friendly enough with your time and resources, you can convince another faction to side with you, forging anything from a trade agreement to a cease fire. However, to win, you'll have to break said pact.



CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Capital ships are the Big Daddies of *Sins*, releasing fighters and bombers to do their bidding, and firing gigantic laser beams on other ships. They can even colonise planets while doing so.



UEFA EURO 2008

Jumpers for goalposts, beans on toast

WEBSITE snipurl.com/uefa2008

FOOTBALL IS A funny old game, apparently, but in this demo you must play as one of two humourless sides, France or Germany, and beat each other in a ceremonial half of deadly serious football. If you've played a football game in the last eight years, you'll know exactly how this one works. If you haven't, start now.

The game is a lot like *FIFA 08* (issue 188, 80%) – not really surprising as both games are from the EA stable – but in the best possible way.

There've been a few graphical tweaks in UEFA 2008 (which is reviewed on page 82), and it still plays as smoothly as its predecessor, but now with added international glitz. Enjoy.



ED'S FUN FOOTIE FACTS



GERMANY

In 2007 Germany's female footie team opened the Women's World Cup with an 11-0 victory over Argentina. Women are scary.



FRANCE

Eric Cantona wasn't allowed to play in Euro 96 after he kicked a Crystal Palace fan in the face.

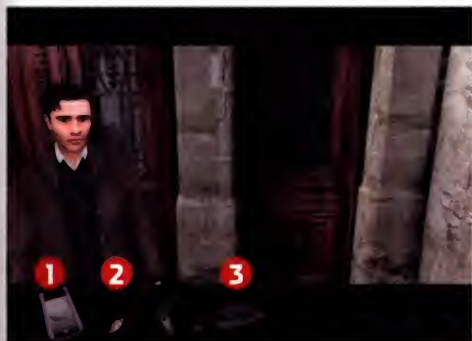
OVERCLOCKED

Not as scary as overclocking your PC...

WEBSITE overclocked-game.com

POINT-AND-CLICK protagonist Dave McNamara has a tough life. His marriage is a shambles, he got shoved out of his last job and his new one involves curing nutcases of insanity.

In this demo you delve into the mind of a young man, stepping into his past and trying to help him make sense of the situation that brought him into the Staten Island Forensic Hospital.



1 Beep Borp Boop

Dave's PDA stores data about the big mystery he uncovers as the game progresses.

2 In The Eyes

The pendulum hypnotises patients and lets Dave leave this world and enter theirs.

3 Buzz, Buzz

The pager receives messages from people too scared to use the phone in the PDA.

PATIENTS WITH NO PATIENCE



Look into my eyes.

PATIENT #1

This man's mind contains guns, physics puzzles and evil corridors. He has problems.



Er, maybe not.

PATIENT #5

This young man attacks a nurse at the demo's start. And then throws you from the room.

BEST OF THE REST



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: TCG

WEBSITE entertainment.upperdeck.com/wow/en

This detailed intro to *WOW: TCG* eases you into this splendid card game. If you like it, print out the two demo decks from the site above to go with the pack that comes with this issue.



EUROPA UNIVERSALIS: ROME

WEBSITE paradoxplaza.com/rome

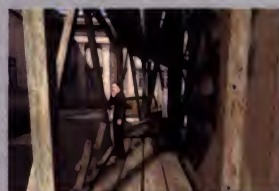
Depth-wise the historically accurate *Europa Universalis* series is on a level with the *Civilization* franchise, so you may get stuck on this demo for more hours than is healthy. See page 74 to see just how deep it goes.



FAR CRY

WEBSITE farcrygame.ubi.com

In celebration of the awesome-looking sequel, we've slung onto the disc the original demo to get you back in the mood for more violent action, with all kinds of jungle madness, fast-paced combat and gorgeous sandy beaches.



SHERLOCK HOLMES: NEMESIS

WEBSITE www.focus-home.com

Baker Street's iconic cocaine addict goes up against the legendary French gentleman thief Arsène Lupin. The publishers say this demo has hours of gameplay, though this is a point-and-click so that could amount to seven minutes.

PCZONE
HOT
DOWNLOADS

KUNG FU PANDA

WEBSITE www.gamershell.com/download_24848.shtml



If you've ever fought a panda, you'll know it's not easy. Now imagine fighting a panda who knows kung fu, and you'll know the difficulty of this demo. Try your luck as an ursine martial artist, and good Lord, wear a helmet.

SAM AND MAX 205: WHAT'S NEW, BEELZEBUB?

WEBSITE www.gamershell.com/download_24720.shtml



As has become quite the norm for these pages, we're mentioning a Sam and Max episode, as they invariably pop up just before or just after we've gone to print. This is a demo of the season finale, in which Sam and Max face... the devil!

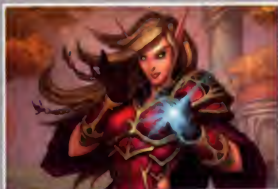
SNIPPETS



KOREA LOVES HELLGATE

WEBSITE hellgate.london.com

Despite being hated across most of the internet, *Hellgate: London* has gone down a storm in Korea, with the most successful online gaming launch in three years. "To become the most successful launch in Korea for over three years is an incredible achievement," said Bill Roper.



CHINA LOVES WOW

WEBSITE www.zorp.th9.com

Chinese *WOW* operators The9 have said that they've had a record million subscribers online at once. That is around a ninth of the amount of people subscribed to the game. If only they'd all bid on our Tat Zone stuff, kids would get more Gameboys.



WE LOVE TINY MARIO

WEBSITE unipurl.com/javamario

Making a game that even can-and-string internet users can enjoy, a cunning young chap has recreated the first level of Nintendo classic *Mario Bros.* as a 14KB java applet.

FOREVER FRIEND



TrackMania Nations Forever crashes into Will Porter. In 3D!

WEBSITE www.trackmania.com/en

THAT I FELT nauseous and giddy even before I'd discovered a pair of 3D glasses to wear when playing *TrackMania United Forever* is testament to the love I feel for the little car game that took over France. That I continued to play while making dangerous-sounding retching noises as I passed nearby bulbous zeppelins in mid-air perhaps redoubles it again.

For the layman it's difficult to work out why this blend of the *Krypton Factor*'s obstacle course and a crash-free *Carmageddon* should endear such love.

TrackMania Nations Forever's origins are genuinely confusing. This is a free standalone sequel to the also-free *TrackMania Nations* and an update to the retail version of *TrackMania United*, that delivers a slew of graphical niceties, extra challenges and an emphasis on creating a level playing field in terms of content access across both versions of the game.

In fact, *TrackMania United Forever* is also due for an imminent retail release should you desire its rally courses, track design puzzles and serious truckage.



Aside from the eye-melting speed rendered by the game and its touching attachment to the cursor keys, the joy comes in the community. Amazingly it's still a game unrivalled in its seamless integration with online track designers and competitors with its MySpace-style



web navigation system. And it's now in 3D! 3 bloody D! That's amazing!

You can play *TrackMania Nations Forever* in full right now as it's been lovingly cut and pasted onto our cover DVD and, as ever, could run smoothly on a breadboard attached to a LCD watch.

YOU'VE GOT DUELMAIL

The Witcher: DuelMail beta begins, crowd goes wild

WEBSITE duelmail.thewitcher.com

SINCE THE ADVENT of *Off-Road Velociraptor Safari*, it seems that browser-based gaming has grown brash and confident, like a man finally admitted to a lady's bedchamber.

Striding red-faced out of that room is CD Projekt RED's web-based fighting game, *The Witcher: DuelMail*, that allows you to fight your friends with a mere click of your mouse.

You can be either a witcher, a frightener (an insanely hard giant

insect created by mages), or a sorceress. Each class has specific defensive or offensive abilities that are dropped into a queue, prior to the fight beginning. Once you select an opponent and an attack/defence routine, the fight can begin after your foe has set their moves.

The fights themselves are decided by whoever does the most damage, with the key being the successful prediction of what your assailant will do and when, and the hope that you'll

brutalise them before they do the same to you.

While at first it feels a little dry, once you level up from a few battles you gain the ability to modify your damage with both skill boosters and equipment, and the game effectively opens up to a fairly addictive turn-based RPG.

DuelMail is taking on new users now – you just need to create an account at CD Projekt's forums – so we advise you sign up and take a look.



ANY WITCH WAY YOU CAN

The Witcher patch adds new adventures and an editor...

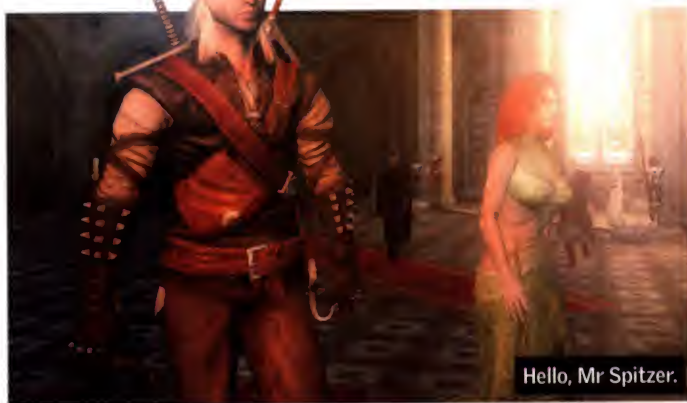
WEBSITE www.thewitcher.com

JUST AS SOON as we were getting itchy waiting for the dialogue patch for *The Witcher* we discussed last issue, CD Projekt RED have released a brand new, two-hour long adventure and the *D'Jinni Adventure Editor* as a separate download.

The new quest comes with the *Module Edition Upgrade* (aka patch 1.3) and focuses on the story of the other witchers that you met at the game's start, rather than Geralt, and even has multiple endings for replayability value.

The *D'Jinni* editor is complex, but lets you to create new adventures with their own cutscenes, maps and quests.

Be aware however that *Vista* users need to run a hotfix before the patch. And the patch is needed to use *D'Jinni*.



Hello, Mr Spitzer.

This is an absolutely brilliant thing for CD Projekt to do, and we applaud them for giving modders free, well-developed and supported tools. Hooray!

The Witcher Enhanced Edition will contain these extras, another adventure, two music albums, a game guide, and a completely new English dialogue.

NAUGHTY PLATFORMER

A magical game with a terrible name

WEBSITE snipurl.com/shitgame

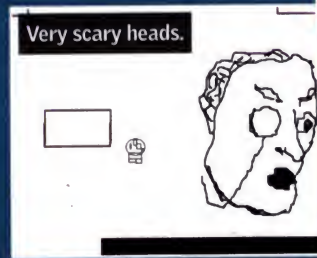
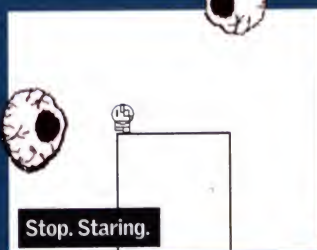
MS PAINT IS the origin of many and varied attempts at squiggly-lined, 'fill colour' works of art, and has now spawned the wonderful *Shit Game*, by freeware developer Mark Johns.

Entirely made up of bizarre drawings made as he travelled across America, *Shit Game* is a simple platformer with high hopes. You follow the adventures of a monocled young man on his journey across a barren land full of gigantic heads that spit shotgun shells, bubbling eyeballs, angry ghosts and enormous hairy stomping legs.

This is all a statement on the way that games are made these days, and

Johns encourages players to try and exploit and enjoy the bugs in the engine, and there're plenty to be found.

Shit Game is so silly that you'll enjoy the green hell out of it and it's totally free, so give it a go at the link above.



SNIPPETS



MAN HATES IGE.COM

WEBSITE snipurl.com/goldfarmer
A man is suing gold-farming company IGE.com, for allegedly hurting the economy in Azeroth by selling in-game gold for real-world cash. Antonio Hernandez claims IGE.com is warping prices and generally making it harder to exist in *WOW* without buying gold.



BROWSERS LOVE CRAYONS

WEBSITE magic.pen.fizzlebot.com
In a beautiful homage to indie legend Kloonigames, *Magic Pen* has all of the facets that made *Crayon Physics* great, mixed with a few ideas of its own – as well as being trapped inside your browser for easy at-work use.

Bug-Fix of the Month

THIS MONTH
SIM CITY SOCIETIES

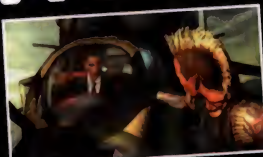


"Added The Burgazoid 6000 disaster."

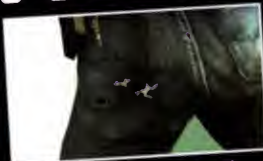
MOVIE OF THE MONTH

MERCENARIES 2: WORLD IN FLAMES

A surefire hit on the consoles, us PC gamers are lucky enough to be able to experience the next chapter in EA's A-Team simulator/third-person shooter saga, which has you in the shoes of angry Swede Mattias as he goes toe-to-toe with a Venezuelan drug lord.



Oh, hello there, you appear to be trying to steal my helicopter. That's not a nice thing to do.



Ow, you shot me in the arse! No, really, Mattias gets shot in the arse. How very embarrassing...



...to take revenge for injuring his buttock, he decides to go on a one-man rampage against Solano...



...involving about as many explosions as one man can make in a single day. Hells yeah.

SNIPPETS



LAWYERS HATE WARGAME

WEBSITE snipurl.com/kriegspiel

The creator of wargame *Kriegspiel*, Alexander Galloway, has been issued with a cease-and-desist letter by the estate of Guy Debord, the creator of the board game *Kriegspiel* is based on. The lawyers claim that *Kriegspiel* infringes Debord's copyright.



THE UN HATES MMOS

WEBSITE nationstates.net

Jennifer Government: *NationStates* – a free-to-play civic MMORPG that lets you build your own nation – has been ordered to stop using the United Nations' logo and name by the UN, as it was "unauthorized and in violation of the provisions of international and US laws."



Q3A LOVES IPODS

snipurl.com/quake3ipod

In the spirit of high-brow phone-hackery, indie developer HermitWorks have managed to get *Quake III Arena* running on dual iPod Touches, with firing done with a tap of the screen and movement by tipping the iPod. They promise a fully functional and easy-to-use version in the future. *Q3 iPod* was designed as a test to get HermitWork's game *Space Trader* (www.playspacetrader.com) on the iPod.

FLIGHT OF THE VALKYRIE

Tony Sergi, space combatant and mod maker, rolls into town

WE LOVED PROJECT *Valkyrie* when we rounded up some of our Fight Club regulars to give it a go. This is a *Team Fortress 2* mod that's a mixture of *Metroid Prime*, *Half-Life 2* and *Tron*, and it's absolutely astonishing quite how professional it is – not only one of the best-looking, but most tightly made mods of the last few years. We pursued Tony Sergi, founder of *Valkyrie* creators Blackened Interactive, down a tube in the wall...

Q Where did *Project: Valkyrie* come from?

A *Project Valkyrie* started out as a team-building exercise. Since Chris Bailey and I both love *Metroid*, we decided to use it as the base for the project. In the beginning this allowed us to not have to dilly around with concepts and designs, as the universe was there. Eventually we took our own little spin on things, and came up with more of a custom story if you will. It's not an exact *Metroid* clone, but the feel is definitely retained.

PV has a really individual style – what has your artist worked on before?

Our concept artist Jordan Ratzlaff spends his day job working as a designer for a few animated specials and commercials, as well as web/flash design. The *PV* art team consisted of more than one artist: Jordan, Victor, Rashad Foux, Frank Rapoza (who is currently colouring *T-Bird & Throttle* by Josh Howard), and Jonathan McDermott all contributed to what you see in the first release.

Do you think mods are dying?

I feel that some modders don't want to take that risk of just doing something for



Good at killing, can't use chopsticks.

fun and releasing it, instead they put too much focus on being 'the next best thing'. This causes many delays, making the team unsatisfied because new games come out that are similar, or are just so much better looking than what they've spent all this time working on that they want to start over.

What do you think are the best mods out there?

Off the top of my head the most notable mods (that didn't become retail!) that I can think of right now would probably be *The Specialists*, *Natural Selection*, *Classic*



Use the seashells.

Doom, *Lithium (Quake II)*, *Firearms*, *Empires*, *Fortress Forever* and an oldie that I think was really under-appreciated: *Global Warfare*.



Shiny, happy space-people.



The Hilton Andromeda.

WE ARE THE WHIRLED

Want browser-based games and user-made content? Read on...

WEBSITE www.whirled.com

THOSE WHO CONSUME web content like one of those truck-o-saurus things they have in America may remember the excellent web comic *Mac Hall*. Creator Ian McConville has joined forces with *Puzzle Pirates* creators Three Rings to create Whirled.com, a bizarre web-portal-meets-social-network type arrangement.

Each user has their own "room," much like Sony's upcoming PlayStation 3 Home network, with things in it such as a playable piano, a chair, and direct access to games.

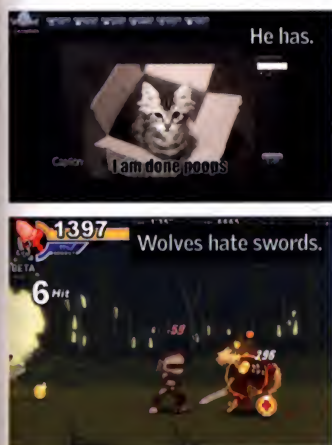
You purchase content for the room by playing the games, which are in some cases brilliant like McConville's very own *Whirled Brawler* – a side-scrolling beat 'em up that's something like *Maple Story* meets *Streets of Rage* – and *LolCaptions*, a game that has you captioning images of cats and then voting on the funniest one. The latter is puerile and silly fun, but you'll be surprised how addictive it is with a group of obtusely minded dullards, chortling at newly-forged lolcats and



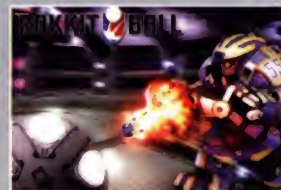
rude words they've added to otherwise benign images.

Most of these games also have multiplayer functionality and improve dramatically with the addition of friends who can help or hinder your progress; especially in *Brawler*, which can be a little overwhelming for the solitary chap.

Whirled.com is still in beta at the moment, but with the quality of contributions so far – including this month's Freeware Web Game of the Month *You've Got To Burn The Rope* (page 113) and the addictive Trophy Achievements system, this could take off in a big way.



SNIPPETS



INSTANTACTION LOVES SPORT/VIOLENCE

WEBSITE www.instantaction.com
GarageGames' free-to-play browser service, InstantAction, will sport another 3D action game – *RokitBall*. This sports/action game is similar to *Unreal Tournament*'s much-missed *Bombing Run*, the greatest mode in FPS history.



NCsoft ADORES YOUR MONEY

WEBSITE ncsoft.com
NCsoft are introducing a new way of pooling your money into faux-currency to use in their online games. Players will be able to buy NCcoins, at an exchange rate of \$1 to 100 NCcoins, with the service debuting in robot-fighter *Exteel* before being slowly pushed into the rest of their catalogue.



NOBODY LIKES PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA

WEBSITE www.burningsea.com
Flying Lab Software have shut down seven out of the 11 *Pirates of the Burning Sea* servers, saying it's a bid to keep the game's population balanced. This is a sad occasion for the MMO, which launched with an interesting concept but didn't end up pushing the boat out far enough.

EVE GETS THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Space MMORPG has first ever player-driven ruling council

WEBSITE www.eve-online.com

TO SOMEHOW PLACATE the cynical masses' mistrust caused by allegations of scandalous behaviour by a developer, CCP are creating a Council of Stellar Management to give players a directly involved voice in the goings-on and development of the game.

The council will have been voted in by the time you read this, and its members will meet with CCP in Iceland, in real life.

Whether or not the council will help is another thing entirely, but it's a revolutionary start to fixing problems with the game.



Let's govern!



The space station PC ZONE.



Freeware is dedicated to bringing you the best free games content the internet has to offer. Games that give your hours of fun and ask nothing in return. We tap on your windows and rap on your doors, so open up because it's freeware time and there's not a second to waste. This month, kill yourself over and over, kill other people over and over, swing around a bar over and over, flip between arcade ROMs over and over, and burn a rope once.



BONESAW: THE GAME

DEVELOPER Kyle Pulver
WEBSITE snipurl.com/bonesaw

IN THIS TWEE platformer, you play the last remaining survivor of a hockey team that's been transported to some nefarious netherworld by an evil referee, so that the rival team may win the 'big game'. Now you must rescue your teammates so that the big game may be won not by them, but by you!

Bonesaw: The Game looks and plays like a peculiar version of *Kirby*, in which you don't inflate yourself and absorb the powers of those you inhale, but instead drink the blood of your enemies to power up your hidden move. That hidden move is known as the Bonesaw, and in using this Bonesaw you annihilate screens worth of enemies in a flurry of frenzied strikes.

The fact that you're a hockey player chasing a referee doesn't really impact on the gameplay much, which is good because I don't know much about hockey at all.

Freeware



Steve Hogarty stands in judgment of yet more free games

KAROSHI 2.0

Prepare to die a thousand deaths

DEVELOPER Jesse Venbrux WEBSITE www.yoyogames.com/games/show/32253

INCREASINGLY IT APPEARS that the only way for game developers to truly explore their medium is to slip out from beneath the duck-feather duvet of commercialism and roll naked onto the shag carpet that is my freeware metaphor.

And by "explore their medium", I don't mean mindless and opinion-numbing excursions into poncey "are games art?" territory, I mean stuff like *Karoshi 2.0*, from the creator of *Frozdd*.

In it, you seek your own death over and over again – a task which is harder to accomplish than you might imagine. Death occurs through crushing, falling off the screen or touching spikes. These means to your demise are introduced in a straightforward way, but they morph and change to expand beyond your reach, bucking paradigms and shifting goalposts. *Karoshi 2.0* mistreats the player in a hilarious way, tricking you by denying your suicide at the last possible moment.

The previous game (which is still playable at



snipurl.com/karoshi) dabbled in clean-cut puzzles, having you push blocks about in such a way as to allow you to bounce a bullet all the way into the back of your head – but the sequel dives right into some of the most fiendish, brain stumping, wrong-minded puzzles imaginable.



Remember when *Metal Gear Solid* told you to get Meryl's codec frequency off the back of the game box – and you had to go on GameFAQs because you'd bought the game down the market? *Karoshi 2.0* dicks about with gaming's fourth wall in much the same way, interacting with you in as many ways as it can.

You begin to distrust the game as it moves onwards, and the means of completing levels become increasingly obtuse and subversive – way more than what you first think the game will be capable of. The whole thing is essentially a running gag, but one whose punchline will constantly take you by surprise.

Just persevere through the tougher challenges, as the payoff is worth it.



GYMNAST

You win when you're spinning

DEVELOPER Walaber WEBSITE www.walaber.com

WITH THE OLYMPICS drowning in a fug of repulsive abuses of human rights, there's no better time to board up your windows and sit and play *Gymnast* forever and ever.

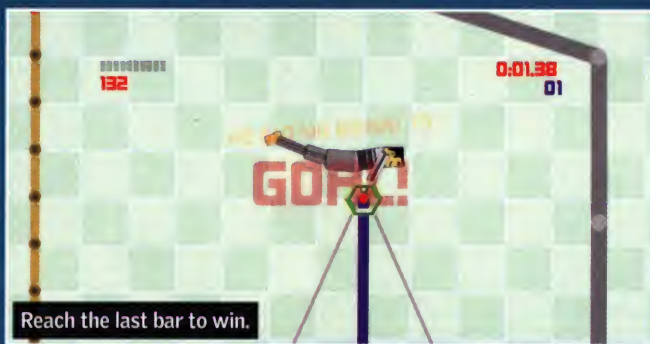
Gymnast is an acrobatics simulator, utilising (and requiring) the Xbox 360 controller's dual analogue thumbsticks to control a gymnast's arms and legs.

Make no mistake, you'll spend your first half an hour spasming about the

bar, smashing your skull into it, flying off at speed and landing on your spine – but with time and practice you begin to get into the swing of it, as it were.

One thumbstick controls the arms, letting you lift your body, while the other controls the legs to generate momentum. The actual on-screen motions look fairly realistic too, with physics magic conspiring to create a wholesome and yet relentlessly addictive experience.

There are enough levels here to fill out a fat lady's leotard too – the only caveat being that they all require you to have that 360 controller in your hands. Honestly, you won't get past the menu screen without one.



ROM CHECK FAIL

You've got fail

DEVELOPER Farbs WEBSITE www.farbs.org

HOW ROM CHECK FAIL got made is a great story, and one that could only happen in the Freeware section. In the beginning, there was a random game name generator. And people saw that it was good – who could resist the charms of an imaginary game called *NBA Wizard in Crazyland?* Or *M.C. Escher's Techno Daredevils?*

For the people of The Independent Gaming Source, imaginary wasn't enough. So they made games based on results from this random name generator. And that's how we ended up with *ROM CHECK FAIL*; a tiny, bizarre comedy game in which the player and the enemies switch to those of a different game every couple of seconds. One second you're Pac-Man fending off



the *Gauntlet* ghosts, suddenly the screen's awash with test sprites and you're the *Asteroids* ship fending off the deadly vectors from *Qix*.

A joke's a joke, and *ROM CHECK FAIL* has expert comic delivery – but the game goes way beyond the comedy, by actually being playable. And that's the

difference between a laugh and a round of applause.

You should also check out the rest of the randomly named entries at www.tigsource.com/features/vgng, where you'll be greeted by such greats as *Russian Landmine Patrol* and *Incomprehensible Penguin Arena*.



WEBGAME OF THE MONTH



YOU HAVE TO BURN THE ROPE

WEBSITE www.mazapan.se/games/BurnTheRope.php

GAMES, EH? IF they're not telling you what to do, they're confusing you with options, leaving us scrabbling for worms in the cold while others sit inside, warmed by the fires of certainty. Damn those game designers. The pox on them!

You Have To Burn The Rope is a joke game, which signposts every little thing you must do to beat it. You'll only need 30 seconds or so to complete it, but it's one man's attempt to shine a spotlight on lazy game design, or something.

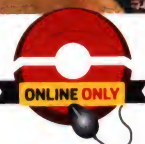
There's a song at the end of it, just like in *Portal*, and it's accompanied by a retrospective and nostalgic recap of the game's events. Remember when you ran down that corridor? Ahh. Remember when you burned the rope? Sigh.



Someone should make an MMO like this. It would be a huge success.



D.I.P.R.I.P.



Driving Ms Crazy

WEBSITE diprip.com MOD FOR *Half-Life 2*

WHILE THE TITLE (*Die In Pain, Rest In Peace*) makes you feel like you're summoning the Candyman, *D.I.P.R.I.P.* is an astonishing mod – original, well-designed, well-tuned and beautifully made. In its current state, you can choose from three different cars, varying in speed and armour, rolling into a vehicular deathmatch to rival *Carmageddon* and the *Twisted Metal* console series.

You start with a basic minigun, but can pick up power-ups that give you missile launchers, better machine guns and the grenade launcher that lobbs explosives in a beautiful curve – perfect for surprise attacks over the top of buildings.

The maps on offer range from the wide-open spaces of the Village (perfect



for dogfights and dodging missiles) to weaving through the tight buildings of Supermarket, barrelling through well-stocked aisles like an angry rhino in a Tesco Metro.

The combat as it stands is reasonably balanced, with the homing missiles letting you trade off immediate power for accuracy, shooting less missiles but hitting more regularly. Luckily, cunning tactics also allow you to speed towards missile throwers, outdoing them with a flurry of bullets or ramming them hard enough to make them explode.

Deathmatches get more chaotic as you add more vehicles, but small-scale and one-on-one battles are enthralling as paranoia takes over, your eyes flittering

between your car and the radar, until you hear the horrible wailing of the incoming missile siren.

For once, this is a mod that doesn't require a huge cavalcade of people to be online. In fact, we had a lot of fun mucking around with a few randoms – no more than three – before we gained the support of a motley crew of onlookers who wanted to blow us up.

D.I.P.R.I.P.'s makers are promising to develop it further over the months, with more vehicles and maps a definite, along with some improvements to the handling, which at times felt a little looser than we wanted. Regardless, we can't recommend this game enough, and as a result have put it on the disc for you to enjoy.



PHILIP MUWANGA'S SQUAD COMMANDER

Herding dangerous cats

WEBSITE snipurl.com/philipmuwanga MOD FOR *Unreal Tournament 2004*

HOORAY! HOORAY FOR originality! And hooray for sticking to your guns, Philip Muwanga! In a world made up of missed deadlines and broken promises, we can't pile enough praise on anyone who sticks with a project for,



The brown of war.

as Mr Muwanga has, long years of development, to deliver a worthwhile, challenging and polished mod.

Playing like a *Company of Heroes*-esque RTS, *Squad Commander* focuses on small groups of troops that intelligently use cover, level up and provide suppressing fire for your sergeants, who do their damage up close and personal. Intense small-scale combat is what it's about, with *Squad Commander* relying heavily on your mastery of using cover and suppressing the hardest-hitting enemies while you manoeuvre your sergeant through the firefight to do the dirty work.

Luckily, nothing about *Squad Commander* gets in your way – the AI is incredible, considering that this is a mod built on an FPS engine by one man. When you press F, your troops intuitively find cover, and can be relied upon not to sit around idly in open ground getting shot, instead seeking shelter from enemies and generally acting like you'd want them to, unlike every low-budget RTS we seem to bump into these days.

Squad Commander is an impressive mod, in both technical and gameplay terms, and is a testament to what a bit of patience can reward us with.



WEEKDAY WARRIOR

Looks like someone's got a case of the Mondays

WEBSITE snipurl.com/weekdaywarrior MOD FOR *Half-Life 2*

WEEKDAY WARRIOR IS yet another mod that makes our minds boggle at the inability of some pro developers to make proper games, this time showing full-scale teams how to turn out a good point-and-click adventure game.

Weekday Warrior has you playing as the mild-mannered dreamer Doug, who desperately wishes he could be fictional comic book character 'The Mongoose,' a Solid Snake-esque sneaker. The story itself is short, lasting around 20 minutes, but is genuinely funny, well-written and has some astonishingly good voice acting, even when judging it against professional standards.

The adventure itself is a bizarre romp from inside an office up to the derelict upper floors of the company, involving random minigames, collection quests

and puzzles along the way that won't tax you, but will make you laugh. *Weekday Warrior* is charming, gorgeously made, and one of the most frustration-free things in existence. That this game leads you by the hand, making it easier than breathing, is part of what makes it put a smile on our faces. There's no reason for any self-respecting *Half-Life 2* owner not to try it.



Neat minigames abound.

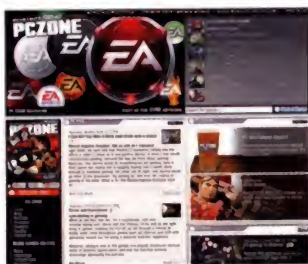


Metal Gear Squalid.



Office Space: the game.





This month, *PC ZONE* forumites spread their passion for and frustration at *Mafia* around; we listen to your rants about Games For Windows LIVE, and how quick-saving problems are signalling the death (yet again) of PC gaming; we report on the *PC ZONE* team's monthly humiliation in *Team Fortress 2*; and talk about graphics cards and get humiliated again in *Half-Life 2: Deathmatch*.

Online Zone

Can't wait for the next *PC ZONE*? Don't panic! Just hit www.pczone.co.uk now for up-to-the-minute news, exclusive features, forums, special competitions, pubcasts, Fight Club news, online chats and the *PC ZONE* blog!

NOTES FROM THE FORUM

This month: cars and mafiosa

Hi *PC Zone*. I'm playing *Mafia*. I'm on the level where you're racing round this track trying to get to your location before your time runs out. Now that the nights are drawing in, I can spend more time playing it.

Matthew9

And they say the art of letter writing is dead.

Dogen_D_Derrible

Hello to everyone on the forum. I've been playing it some more just tonight, though I only had one go. I got a bit further with it as well but, alas, I didn't have the impetus to carry on.

Matthew9

I'm on the edge of my seat.

Bobomunki

Hi again. I'm still on the same level. If you're thinking what level, it's Fair Play. I daren't go back to the beginning, though doing that will give me more time if I do the sections in faster times.

Matthew9

Ah, the race. That can be a bugger. Stick at it.

Dogen_D_Derrible

Hi everyone. I'm up to the actual race now, after doing the running around bits.

Matthew9

The race is a bugger, but once you get it, you'll wonder why you thought it was so hard.

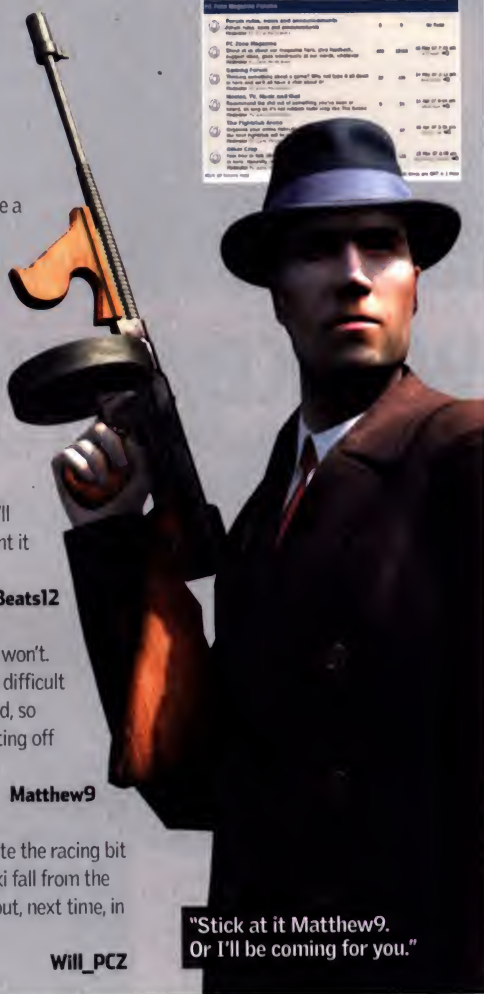
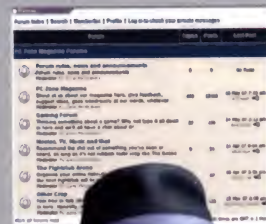
Beats12

No one else says hi so I won't. There were some other difficult bits earlier that I passed, so that bodes well for getting off this section.

Matthew9

Will Matthew9 complete the racing bit in *Mafia*? Did Bobomunki fall from the edge of his seat? Find out, next time, in *PC ZONE*.

Will_PCZ



"Stick at it Matthew9. Or I'll be coming for you."

ON THE BLOG

WE ASKED FOR your comments on LIVE Windows For Games, as our own have been as pretty and elegant as a talent show for six year olds. The general opinion was that LIVE For Windows Games was a hell of a faff, unreliable and had all the grace of skid-marked pants.

Will also made the error of posting a "fluff" piece about his quick-saving hell, which angered our pet grumpy face into a full-blown whoopsie about registry entries, save game locations and, of course, the death of PC gaming. Honestly, PC gaming's been dying for so long now, you'd think the circling vultures would have starved and fallen from the sky...

Elsewhere, Ed ranted about *Madden* developers blaming PC gamers for the title moving exclusively to consoles. Most of us didn't care, but Ed seemed quite passionate. And it stopped him nibbling at our ankles for a while.

PC gaming dead? Well, we're still getting paid... we think.



POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE WIN!

Send us your MMO character screenshots to win stuff...

You already know all about our 'PC ZONE Around The World' bit in Letters, where we ask you to send in your photos of yourself holding your favourite mag all over the globe. Well now, you're cordially invited to send us screenshots of you in your favourite MMO with a jolly explanation of what you're up to. The best two postcards sent to us every month at letters@pczone.co.uk will be printed here and win a PC game. Get snapping...

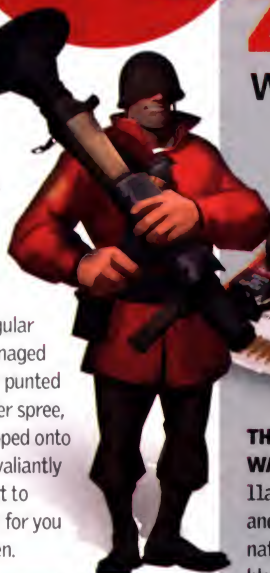
FIGHT CLUB



COME AND
TAKE ON THE
ZONE STAFF IN
OUR MONTHLY
ONLINE GAMING
FREE-FOR-ALL!

Still with the *TF2* – but now
with added *HL2: Deathmatch*

AS THE WEATHER picks up, the days lengthen, and the parks fill with the exposed flesh of the young and desirable, we like nothing more than to draw the curtains, adopt an unhealthy posture and get butchered by our readers at online fisticuffs (with guns). So this month, not only did we play our usual round of *Team Fortress 2* – in which Will and Steve joined a regular crowd and welcomed Fight Club virgin Blade, who had just managed to get his hands on *The Orange Box* – we also had our buttocks punted in *Half-Life 2: Deathmatch*. When embarking on our *HL2* murder spree, we found that the old *ZONE* server was on the blip – so we hopped onto an empty Jolt server, where Quite Rob and Karate Kid battled valiantly for the top spots, only to have Rob pull a last toilet-hurling spurt to claim victory and a copy of *STALKER*. DragonZigg, get in touch for you booby prize – we promise it won't be anything that's gone rotten.



CHAT ZONE



We were late, but you came anyway

Graphics cards:
should look sexier.

THE EVENT

WAS only set at 11am of the day of the chat and five minutes before the monthly natter was due to start, the room was bleakly deserted. Log had a chance to check the echoes and run his fingers nervously through his silky, luxuriant beard, before the notice went up. Then the next minute was like the tear-jerking finale to the film *The Boy Who People Liked After All*.

With guest star and former editor Jamie Sefton, the chat became a spiral of graphics card trainspotting and pre-teen lol-spam, so we used it as a launchpad into a game of *Half-Life 2: Deathmatch*, instead.

Next time: structure, planning, and anyone being a persistent spamming dickabout will get kicked out. Mm-kay?

How to join in!

To be a part of next month's *ZONE* Chat, join our Steam Community group: *PC ZONE (PCZ)*. If you don't have Steam, first be ashamed of yourself, and then download it from steampowered.com. Keep an eye out for announcements at our forums at pczone.co.uk for the date of the next chat event...



Was there truly life
before the ragdoll?



CAN'T MAKE FIGHT CLUB?

If you can't make it to Fight Club – perhaps you're too busy picking flowers, you big girly-man – then join other *PCZ* readers on the following public servers. Who knows – some of us might even be there. The latest info can be found at www.pczone.co.uk.

WHO'S WHO

Jamie Sefton *PCZ_NorthernScum*
Will Porter *PCZ_Batsphinx*
Steve Hogarty *PCZ_escaped_monkey*
Phil Wand *PCZ_People's Front Of Judea*
Jon Blyth *PCZ_Log*
Ed Zitron *PCZ_EdZed*

- COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE**
cs.zonegames.co.uk:27015
cs.zonegames.co.uk:27025
- HALF-LIFE 2: DEATHMATCH**
hl2.zonegames.co.uk:27065
- DAY OF DEFEAT: SOURCE**
dod.zonegames.co.uk:27085
- TEAM FORTRESS CLASSIC**
tfc.zonegames.co.uk:27045
- ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS**
pczone2.jolt.co.uk
- CALL OF DUTY 4**
Coming soon
- BATTLEFIELD 2142**
bf2142.zonegames.co.uk:16567
- TEAM FORTRESS 2**
pczone2.jolt.co.uk:27115
pczone2.jolt.co.uk:27125
pczone2.jolt.co.uk:27135

Holiday
greetings!



I spend a lot of my time trying to make myself look cool in *World of Warcraft*, to make up for the fact that I'm playing *WOW*. I think this pose is like '80s dance flick *Fame*, only with a massive robot behind me.

Solapowulh
(Jeremy Southgate)

Wish You
Were Here!



I named my hunter Sebastian, after my favourite band, Belle & Sebastian. So when I got my first pet, it was pretty clear what I had to call him. I love Bellend.

Sebastian
(Michael Graves)

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"When samples of the Razer Diamondback Acid Green Gaming mouse appeared in the PCZ office I nabbed one before anyone else could, since I'd spilt Ribena on my existing mouse the week before. This was just as well I had though, since the Razer Diamondback is a remarkably good mouse. I genuinely feel that through using it I'm managing to kill more imaginary bad men than ever before, with a great deal more style I had ever dreamt possible. Seriously though, it's the best mouse I've ever owned - so I'm chuffed that we're giving them away to subscribers."

Will Porter

Will Porter, Editor

Retro ZONE

I can't use that...

ADVENTURE GAME STUDIO

EMULATION
OF THE
MONTH

BUT HOW?

Simply download the AGS suite, which weighs in at a sprightly and efficient 6MB. If you're not on the internet then we've put it on our cover disc, too. Visiting the AGS site is also worthwhile, as there's a huge collection of games created using the tool. Mostly short demo adventures, there are some breathtakingly lovely examples on there. You can also spend time tinkering with the bundled *Demo Quest*, in case the idea of creating something from scratch is too daunting. If you're anything like us, you'll just change a dialogue tree to be filthy rude, then give up.

Links...

- 1 adventuregamestudio.co.uk
The home of AGS, now in its third version.
- 2 new.bigbluecup.com/games.php
A searchable list of games others have made.

IT'S A SHAME real life isn't more like point-and-clicks. Who here, and let's be honest, wants to live in a world where breakfast involves pouring some milk – which you had the foresight to buy earlier, as part of a weekly shop – onto some cornflakes? It may well be delicious, but it's shockingly dull. And why do we carry around all our important keys on a single ring, when it would be much more fun to have a couple of them concealed in an Egyptian sarcophagus? What you want is a swarm of bees surrounding the fridge, and a foot-tapping housemaid who won't let you leave the house until you tidy up. Hang on, that was *Jet Set Willy*. Our bad.

If you want to live in a world of tortured complication then you've probably got *Adventure Game Studio*, the creation kit that gives the power to weave stories to everyone with a PC and a willingness to learn a wee bit of script.

Admittedly, people like you and us are giftless morons who could no more write a decent point-and-click than piss gravy, but that doesn't stop the talented people out there from making their own games. And often publishing them for free. Internet celebrity and scorn-wallower Ben 'Yahtzee' Croshaw is just one of the people who've made full and free games using this toolkit.

AGS is a well-designed environment that's friendly enough to replace the



daunting edge of bewilderment and fear with a sense of experimentation. You can only go so far without learning the scripting language, but if you've ever used a variable and a function it's just a matter of learning some new commands. Within metaphorically no time, you'll be building your own, filth-

packed dialogue trees and trying desperately to think of a puzzle that doesn't involve opening a dusty chest with a tiny bronze key. As a premium example of the invention and have-a-go attitude that makes the PC great, we hereby salute AGS and its gorgeous creator, Chris Jones.

SIX OF THE BEST

Proud horses from the AGS stable



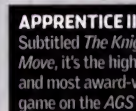
THE ADVENTURES OF FATMAN

The first commercial AGS release, and a joke direct from *Russ Abbot's Madhouse*.



AL EMMO

Another commercial release with shonky jokes and awful voices, but some excellent puzzles.



APPRENTICE II

Subtitled *The Knight's Move*, it's the highest rated and most award-winning game on the AGS site.



A TALE OF TWO KINGDOMS

A totally impressive tribute to Sierra-style games of yore. Hours of love for all.



PRINCESS MARIAN

Loveable slosh from a Scotsman who makes adventures as a present to his wife. Don't laugh!



5 DAYS A STRANGER

Part of the *Chzo Mythos* series by Yahtzee, in which thief Trilby robs aristocrats with puzzling consequences.

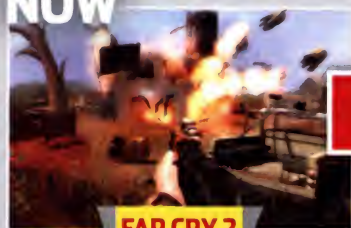


Classic bobbleheads.

NOW & THEN

FAR CRY 2 vs SABRE WULF

NOW



FAR CRY 2

FOR MANY PEOPLE, jungle combat is "what it's all about". They simply hate the idea of killing terrorists in an urban landscape, and gain an indefinable pleasure from the possibility that their murderous acts might be witnessed by a kookaburra. *Far Cry 2* may be set in jungles and the zebra-strewn plains of the Serengeti, but true connoisseurs will only play Ultimate's *Sabre Wulf* to recreate that feeling of heat and leaf.

The peaceful gazelles of *Far Cry 2* are nowhere to be seen – this jungle maze is a hostile and forbidding place, with man-sized spiders and

THEN



SABRE WULF

ground that catches fire if you don't keep moving. And the Sabre Wulf, who drew terrified piss from pre-teen winks, thanks to the fact he appeared randomly and without warning, just like a real Sabre Wulf would.

When playing *Far Cry 2*, ask yourself one question. Will you, when moving into a new area, scream, "Oh God, it's the Sabre Wulf, quick, see if you can kill it, oh shit, nothing's working, run away"? If you don't, then Ubisoft have failed, and every single minute of the last 20 years has been a complete waste of time.

PLAY IT!

PCZONE

ON THE DVD

Play *Sabre Wulf* the way God intended

- 1 Download a Spectrum emulator. Make sure you download a 48k Spectrum emulator. *Sabre Wulf* is a system hog that simply won't function in a 16k environment.
- 2 Locate, download and point your emulator to a tape image *Sabre Wulf*. Another of Ultimate's games, *JetPac*, sells for £4 on Xbox LIVE Arcade, which is as rum as what pirates drink.
- 3 Please understand that for reasons of legality we can't provide you with these things. We can only look on, applauding, while you use the teeming hulk of the internet to break every law there is.



BACK IN THE DAY...



BUILD.EXE

By Steve Hogarty

Unless you've used the ancient map editor *build.exe*, which came with *Duke Nukem 3D*, you'll never guess how water worked in the game. Instead of going underwater, you were actually transported to another part of the map – a room built solely to act as the underwater bit. Now consider that level set in a flooded San Francisco and you begin to realise how amazing 3D Realms are.

And get this. The mirrors in *Duke Nukem 3D* – they were actually windows into a copy of your room, and the pane of glass was given a property so it projected sprites of Duke into the mirrored room. Also, you couldn't build rooms on top of rooms, the engine couldn't do that.

And that building you demolish? It's a series of huge, upside-down doors.

I know!

MAME FRAME THE GREAT FUNKY OFF

Developer: Various | Year: 1981-1995

WHEN PRINCE TOLD us his name and claimed to be funky, we were forced to concur. The awesome tsunami of Prince's funkiness brooked no argument. In the thousands-strong archives of MAME ROMs, only four games have the audacity to claim that they are funky. But which is funkier?

Coming in last place is *Funky Bee*, which featured in our big bee round-up some months back. You play a bee, who pollinates flowers and spears other insects with a forward-firing stinger. *Funky Fish* – a download weighing just 26k – was far too wee to be funky. Even Prince, who is just two feet tall, would

take up more than 26k. Taking second place is *Funky Jet*, an excellent punching spree that is the only game here that managed to be fun to play.

But snatching the funky crown is Sega's 1996 boxing game, *Funky Head Boxers*. Playing in a resolution that our monitors don't support, *Funky Head Boxers* proved to be as unreachable as the true essence of funk, who we imagine wears a coat made from velvet and smoke. As such, we can only assume that *Funky Head Boxers* is brilliant, and lower our inaugural Funky Crown on its bobbing, funky bounce. If you think you know a funkier game, tell us.



FUNKY GAMES



WHAT IS MAME?

MAME is the Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator, currently emulating over 3500 games. You can download it from www.mame.net – use *Mame32* for a nice front-end. Then you can download *Robby Roto*, which is legal. You can play all the others too, but not legally. So stop it. Right now.



The pretty good Funky Jet.



Lacking in funk.

SUPERTEST

FREEFORM PC GAMING

Because you're never in a rush to finish a good game...

Your View

Last month we talked about being an evil bastard in games, and how much fun it was. Apparently, you guys quite like it too. Here's what you had to say...

KEEPY UPPY

Dungeon Keeper. When I first played it and watched the intro, I thought, "Haha, yes, I'm the knight kicking these goblins' asses to rock music!", right up until the end when the knight gets decapitated to the gleeful roar of the Horned Reaper who snuck up behind him. My confused look gradually turned to a malicious grin when I realised you were the baddie in this game.

apophis_dd

CHOKER-HOLD

Jedi Academy. The Dark Side. Force Grip. Picking up those mere mortals in front of me and hurling them off the nearest edge while I laugh like a maniac.

liquid_metal

ONE... MILLION... DOLLARS!

How could *Evil Genius* not be mentioned in a feature about evil doings? A spiritual successor to *Dungeon Keeper*, but allowing you to care for and nurture your underground lair/dungeon for much longer. Giving you a feeling of closeness to it. And the spies were much better than the heroes, they'd actually be a bloody thorn in your side and required more than just being inundated by your lackeys. And the second half of the game was absolutely brilliant. Shame Elixir folded a while back. They had so much potential. *Sigh* I need to play that game again.

ArchieUK



Build an evil HQ with *Evil Genius*.

WE'RE FREE SPIRITS and the idea of being able to take situations off the rails and into our own hands is innately appealing, despite the fact it's an uncomfortable mixed metaphor. This month's Supertest is all about free-roaming gaming, in honour of the forthcoming delights of *Far Cry 2*.

Predictably, the first game discussed was *Elite*, but we quickly moved on to Chernobyl-worrier *STALKER*, and how fun the free-roaming elements were. Even if that freedom ended up pushing you to the same inevitable places.

FREEDOM!

Next up was *Boiling Point*, a game with interesting concepts that were difficult to enjoy, thanks to the many bugs that

infested it. This was a real shame, considering the original setting, and the potential for fun that presented itself to anyone willing to wade through the mists of failure.

Following on from last issue's preview, we also talked about *Mafia II*, and the potential of 2K Czech building an excellent narrative into a truly open world. Even *Mercenaries 2: World In Flames* got a shout out – the console prequel standing as a remarkably open-ended shooter with a great deal of content to conquer – as it has the look and feel of a DIY *A-Team* game. A brief and predictable skirmish took place when Ed went off on one of his ill-advised and unfollowable tirades, but it all resolved itself when he was told to shut up.

We want to know exactly what your favourite free-roamers are, so log onto www.pczone.co.uk and check out the forum to discuss with us in an asynchronous fashion, the many ways in which you can simulate the freedom of the real world. Alternatively, form no

opinion and just listen to our gobshit recordings on the disc. These are your real-world options. Do whatever the hell you like. **PC7**

"A skirmish took place when Ed went off on one of his unfollowable tirades"



Steve enjoying the ability to free roam.



No illogical boundaries! Behold the right to roam!



Go anywhere, do almost anything in *STALKER*.



Free roam in style with *Boiling Point*.

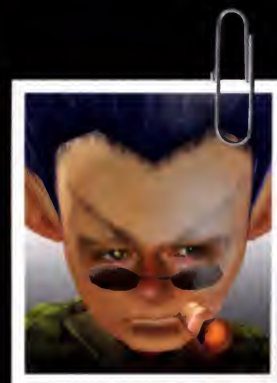


Freely blow stuff up with *Mercenaries 2*.

STEVE HILL'S

NEVERQUEST

Steve Hill is going even deeper underground in *Mythos*...



"MYTHOS IS FUN. *Mythos* is free. *Mythos* is a MMORPG." As mission statements go, the *Mythos* website is brutally austere. On the surface it seems an accurate summary of the situation. However, closer inspection reveals a dark underbelly of deception amidst the cutesy isometric dungeoneering.

Is it really free? Granted, there's no fee for downloading or playing it, but what about the electricity? What about the human cost, the time, the loss of dignity? As a blue-haired Gremlin Pyromancer, what little pride I had has been shredded, although admittedly I do have a cool pair of shades and a big cigar. According to my biog, I am quick-witted and nimble, gregarious, given to occasional fits of temper, agile and strong, with a love of machinery and tinkering, and I'm also gifted in control of elemental fire. In other words, I'm a short-arsed mechanic-cum-arsonist with anger management issues.

Is it fun? To be confirmed. As for the massively multiplayer claim, the grand total of six people I encounter suggests otherwise, particularly as every single one refuses my request to form a party.

Thankfully, *PC ZONE*'s trusty Log has agreed to lead me through the streets of *Mythos*. He's already put in 90 minutes of graft, and as such is way ahead of me, physically, spiritually and geographically. Rushing to meet him, a god-botherer stops me and asks me to clear his vestry of drunken zombies, a task for which I receive a pair of handsome leather gloves.

CYCLOPS TO WORK

"Where do I find the giant spider eye?" asks Ridicule, to no one in particular.

"We're not prepared for this pressure, and within seconds are both dead"

"Are you there, Sidney?" asks Teenaturna, to me in particular.

Hurrah, for 'tis Sir Log of Zoneshire, come to my aid, although as he readily admits, "This is a fucking shit name."

It's not until I look him in the eye that I discover him to be a lovely lady cyclops, albeit dressed in a fisherman's hat and matching Columbo mac.

A more unlikely pairing it would be hard to envisage, but within minutes we are tearing up the countryside, butchering wolves and imps with guns, fire and Log's impressive collection of exploding spiders. Caught up in the blood lust, I kill a beetle and feel instantly remorseful.

FIRESTARTER

We're not here simply to decimate the wildlife though – there's discord to be investigated. Of more pressing concern is the fact I've lost my ability to create fire, something of a problem for a Pyromancer, particularly as we've stepped into a dingy dungeon to look for this godforsaken

discord. With spiders circling, I flail about hopelessly, suddenly emitting a burst of flame from a big stick.

"It was in your wand all the time," points out Log, embarrassingly.

Meanwhile, he's cutting a cyclops-shaped swathe through the dungeon dwellers while I "supervise" from the rear. We finally find the source of discord, which turns out to be bloke with a big sword and a nasty habit of propelling slow-moving but deadly purple orbs in our general direction.

Following our genteel insect massacre, we're not prepared for this pressure, and within seconds are both back in fields of Stonehill, aka dead.

"Tits!" I exclaim, with disgust.

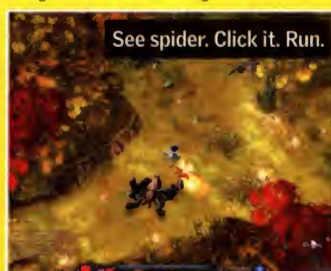
"All that, to perish on a big bastard's blade," exclaims Log, more eloquently.

THE BENNY INSIDE

Undeterred, we head back into the dungeon with the help of a spiv who charges us to return us to the scene of our defeat. This time we have a tactical approach, the tactic being for Log to rapidly circle the brute like Benny Hill gone postal. He eventually emerges perspiring but elated, having slain the beast. I, meanwhile, have put on new trousers and changed my gloves.

Back in town, we are both rewarded for our heroics with a curt "well done" and a measly pair of boots, which Log throws to the ground in disgust. Seeking greater bounty, we agree to take on a job for Farmer Gussen, but I instantly run into arachnid trouble. Log is amused, describing my flight from two small spiders into the jaws of two large ones as "like a *Pac-Man* cutscene."

Once you start running there's no looking back, and I frantically click my way to safety with a huge conga of insects on my tail, risking RSI. Six hours later, I work out that you can run by simply holding down the mouse... **PCZ**



DEVELOPER'S COMMENTARY

UNREAL TOURNAMENT III

Jamie Sefton climbs onboard a Goliath tank with senior producer Jeff Morris to uncover the creation of Epic's "other game"



TO A VETERAN gamer it's strange to think that in the eyes of many, Epic Games is "the company behind *Gears of War*". The US developer built its reputation by creating the atmospheric shooter *Unreal* and the multiplayer online FPS spin-off *Unreal Tournament*. And it

made mountains of cash by licensing versions of the Unreal Engine.

Yet, with all the recent success of *Gears of War*, for senior producer Jeff Morris, there's only one game that reloads his Flak Cannon: "I don't just love *UT3*, I'm in love with *UT3*! It's a dream game for me and definitely the

highlight of my career." For someone who's worked on *Civilization*, *Alpha Centauri* and *Gears of War*, that's a hell of a statement.

Over the next four pages we discover the rejected ideas for *UT3*, where the team made a "rookie mistake" and how the Dark Walker stomped into life.



An Unreal City. (Tereu, Tereu, etc).



The Flak Cannon: still gibbing.

01 UT3 GOALS: "We really wanted to bring *Unreal Tournament* gameplay to the Unreal Engine 3. Also, we were aware that the industry was heading towards these slow-paced, tactical, real-world shooters, so staying true to what *UT* did well was probably the most radical thing we could've done. We tried out other elements, like a Commander mode where you choose artillery strikes and stuff like that, but they felt like they were pulling away from that fast-action twitch *UT* gameplay. We also wanted to reduce the floatiness and the extreme movement of *UT2004*, and find a nice middle-ground between that and the original. I think we nailed it really well. Plus, I'm pleased that even though 70 per cent of the ideas for Warfare didn't pan out, some did stick, like the hoverboard and the orb (which I feel solved the stalemate problem that the *UT2004*'s Onslaught mode had)."

02 WEAPONS GRADE: "We definitely wanted to revisit every single weapon, even things that were umbrella features like how long it took to switch between them. We'd also come up with ideas for new weapons – I think we have 12 weapons in *UT3* – and we were gonna go to 13 or 14, but you're not going to be able to fit them all on a selection wheel. We had core weapons we knew we had to keep, and we integrated features of the ones we didn't into existing weapons. So we put the grenades back in the rocket launcher and Spider Mines became a deployable weapon.

"Actually, a lot of the ideas we had for cool weapons turned into deployables. The EMP, for example, I felt was a nuance weapon – you had to put it down and wait for someone to run over it and then fight 'em! At first I thought nobody was going to do that, but the first time I go online after *UT3*'s release and people are using them all over the place!

"I think we added enough new weapons, along with the new deployables, and the six new Necris vehicles."

03

THE HOVERBOARD: "The main gist was giving people who aren't in a fight a chance to get into one. We needed to make a trade-off – that if they take any damage, they go flying – but we wanted to give them an option to get places quickly. The hoverboard doesn't take up a weapon slot and it's as easy to use as double-jumping. The original inspiration was just solving that problem of distance, but it solved other problems, like guys bailing on you in vehicles.

"We added the hoverboard's tether function, mainly because we thought it would be cool to be airlifted by raptors and towed around by fast-moving vehicles, but it was also a very natural thing to be able to reel yourself in like a fishing line, get close to the vehicle and jump in. The hoverboard was such an elegant solution – it gives the person left behind a chance to get into the vehicle and doesn't rely on the person who took off in the vehicle to realise that they've left somebody behind. It really felt like *UT*, and it was fun to do the taunts and tricks too."

Tony Hawk can ollie, but can he pull off headshots?



"The Commander mode never felt right – nothing feels less like *UT* than clicking on a map!"



"I said, no cameras!"

04

DEATH OF COMMANDER MODE: "One of the cornerstones of iterative game development, when you're playing the game all the time and get it running very early on, is that you want to fail quickly – you don't want to fail six months in, you want to know pretty quickly if a feature is fun so you don't waste man hours and money on it. The Commander mode was one major feature to go – nobody used it, and when they did, it wasn't any fun. The feedback you get from blowing someone up is immediate when you're running around, but in this you'd get these radii that would ring out over this 2D map, that was very similar to the map that you have in Warfare now for choosing which node you teleport to. It just never felt right – nothing feels less like *UT* than sitting on a 2D screen clicking on a map!

"Another one that didn't pan out was real-time terrain transformation during battles, which was a performance burden. Also we fought against the fact that Necris areas made it easier to see enemies, as colours would stand out from the dark background."





05 DARK WALKER: "The lead designer of *Gears of War 2* is a guy named Lee Perry, who was working on a feature of Unreal Engine 3 where you could reverse gravity within an area. The test was a ball with a bunch of tentacles off it, which would go along, enter this region and all the legs would hang upwards, then when it left the area, the legs would drop back down.

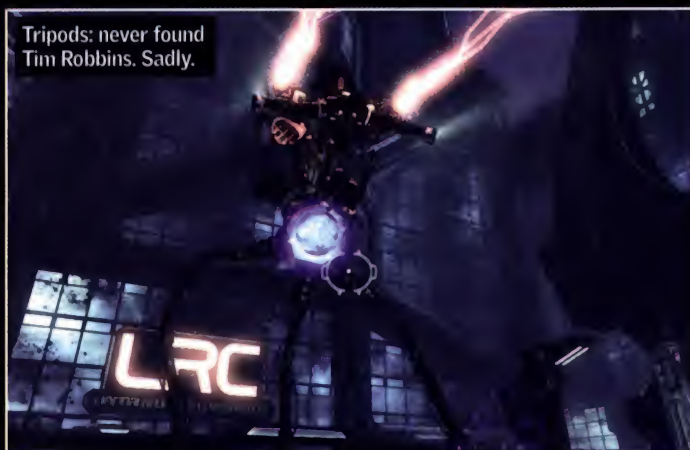
"Steve Polge (*UT3* lead designer) thought it was cool and wondered if we could use an animation system where the legs would be playing in animation, but as soon as they interacted with the ground, they would blend with where they were stepping. That's where the idea for all the walker vehicles came from, and we took that and spent a lot of time getting the legs to look right and move correctly.

"Of all the new features in *UT3*, the vehicles were by far the most time-consuming because they had to feel right and they weren't things that used the existing movement – this one's a walker, this one's a hover-thing, this one's treaded. Man, the Dark Walker took a lot of time to R&D!"

Terrain destruction was dropped early in development.



Tripods: never found Tim Robbins. Sadly.



06 BALANCE OF POWER: "Balancing wasn't as bad as it could've been if we'd totally rebooted the Axon team. We built upon the past, and it freed us up to balance the new things much more than if we'd had a brand new game with all-new features and all-new balancing. It's sort of like a workout – we'd play *UT* early in the morning, that would focus us for the rest of the day, clearing our minds and getting our adrenaline pumping. We're all such fans of the game that playing *UT3* a lot is something that we really enjoy and that's how you balance it – you get some of the best *UT* players in the world trying to exploit the hell out of stuff. From that you're able to make pretty good decisions about what to adjust and tweak."

"We'd play *UT* early in the morning, that would focus us for the rest of the day, clearing our minds"



The exciting Campaign map.



UT3 has already been tweaked by modders.

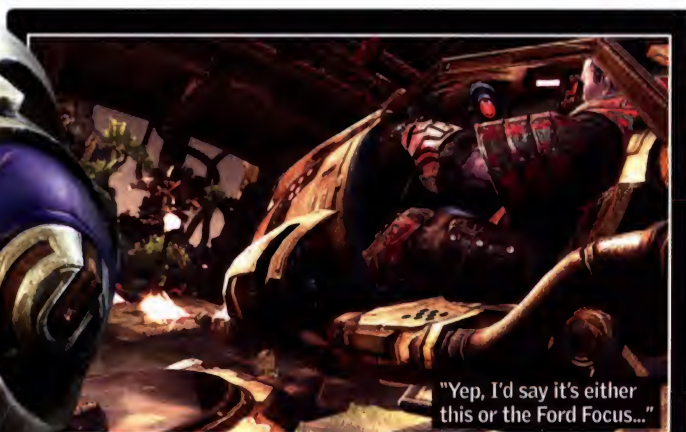
07 LACKLUSTRE CAMPAIGN: "Well, I take a little bit of pride in that people got excited over the single-player after I gushed about it having an RTS-level of story! But fundamentally, there were a lot of things that didn't make it into the campaign.

"There was a lot of story that we wanted to tell in the missions that didn't come out and we made a really big rookie mistake – that you could go two hours, maybe even three or four, between story elements and cinematics – so you never really gave a shit about the characters or about their story arcs. The story itself was campy and over-the-top so it was hard to take seriously, and the single-player mode turned into an eight to 10-hour tutorial. From that perspective it was successful, but who wants to play a 10-hour tutorial? We didn't get the polish into it that we wanted, and because of that it felt flat – it's something that we are definitely looking to get right for future games."

08 COMMUNITY CHEST: "We've seen loads of great stuff from the modding community. One of my favourites is the Jet Pack mod that basically lets you play *Tribes* in *UT*, with a bounding jetpack that runs out and you have to land. There's even a LEGO one, built with bricks, and using our physics engine. You can blow holes in walls in this fully destructible environment that doesn't look anything like a *UT* level. There's some really awesome character mods, such as this really tough tattooed rabbit – that looks like he should be in *Braveheart* – and some people have recreated Master Chief.

"We've launched the Make Something Unreal modding contest now (makesomethingunreal.com) and the best thing is that it makes people finish, instead of diddling with content forever and tweaking. They have this deadline, this goal, to finish by, that forces them to release something that people can play, which can only be good for the community."

"There's nothing else where I can shout, 'Oh my God, I can't believe I saw that!' with such frequency as *UT3*."



"Yep, I'd say it's either this or the Ford Focus..."

09 UNREAL LOVE: "*UT3* has so much content, so much good stuff – everything that's there in-game is enjoyable and fun. It's true to what we did before but it's brought something new to the party. I've worked on a lot of great games, like *Civilization*, *Alpha Centauri* and *Gears of War*, and, for me, *UT3* was my most memorable project. It's the only one that I played for months and months after I shipped. Usually that just never happens, because you're so sick of the game. Even though I'd been working on *UT3* for close to three years, I'd still play it recreationally for hours – it's not bullshit, I'd go home and couldn't scratch that itch with anything else. There's nothing else where I can go and smash shit up and shout, 'Oh my God, I can't believe I just saw that!' with such frequency as I can with *UT3*."

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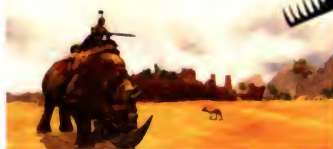
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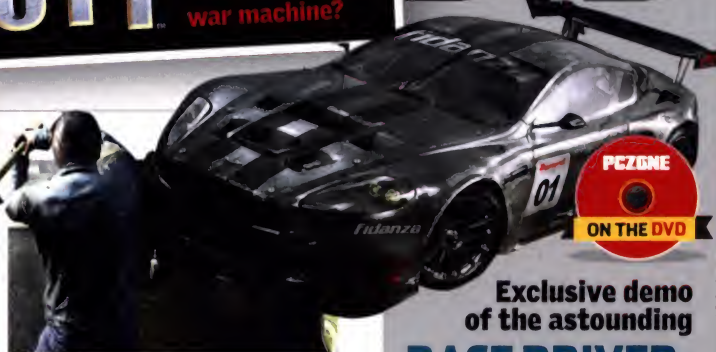
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